

## THE RÔLE OF THE WEIRD.

By TOM WORTH.

A dinner in a haunted house, and what happened before it was over.

“WELL, though I don't make the absolute contention that there is something supernatural about the place, I do maintain that it is distinctly out of the ordinary, and might repay a closer watch.”

The young diplomat from Sweden had just made the above remark as John Craig, of America, put foot on the bamboo threshold and lustily booted a lazy coolie who had the impudence to be in the way.

“Twaddle, Svend,” drawled Crampton, the Briton. “And you know it in your heart of hearts as well as any. It's only the effect of this cursedly romantic environment. I'll confess that, put even a sensible man among these infernally superstitious Malays, let him drift about among their general weirdnesses, and the result does tend toward a somewhat weakening in the direction of the uncanny. But, man, think a minute. What you are in reality asking us to believe is that, not ten miles from here, where we loll before brandy and soda, there exists that absurdest of all absurdities, a haunted house.”

“What's the drift?” broke in Craig's Yankee drawl as he selected an Egyptian cigarette from among its fellows in his leather case. “Something of importance in the spook line? Enough to warrant the attention of a man who thinks?”

“Exactly!” exclaimed Svend, the Swede, in enthusiasm. “Only, of course, the subject is of such a nature that a man usually gets the laugh upon its very mention.”

“Not necessarily,” spoke up a young man of the German legation. “I'll confess that, from a scientific standpoint, I'm interested. In fact, it looks to me, from Svend's description, as though in this affair we had a case worthy of investigation.”

“Just exactly what I desire to do, Carl, investigate. That's it: investigate!”

“Well, gentlemen,” again interrupted Craig. “As I'm late today and haven't heard particulars, would you mind a little further elucidating.”

He swung himself to easy posture in the wicker chair he had selected.

“Little to state,” explained Svend, as spokesman most interested in the subject. “Off here a few

miles in what we may call the suburbs of this distressing town of Singapore, there is a house which has attained a prominence, particularly among the natives. It is stoutly maintained among them to be the residence of all that is gruesome and supernatural. Weird noises, ghostly lights of subdued blueness, and a general air of uncanniness seem to be the order of the day, or rather the night. So much for the native verdict of the place.

“As for my own story, I was passing there about dusk on my little roan the other evening when I, too, witnessed something which I've been trying ever since to forget and yet which holds me with a fascination in remembering.”

“What was it?” cried Craig. “Dog me if I, too, am not becoming some interested.”

Crampton, the Briton, broke into a laugh.

“That's just it, Craig. Svend is surely a master of effect. Right here his description stops. He leaves the imagination to the rest. Which imagination is the firmest foundation all such affairs have to build on.”

“The reason I don't go on with my description of what I saw is that I am absolutely positive you wouldn't believe it, and the only reason I spoke of the matter at all was in the hope that you might become interested enough to join me in further investigation.”

“Well, we certainly don't want to disturb any of your effects. So, go no further, Svend. I'm interested enough already, and I've got a proposition to make.”

Craig even quickened to a semblance of activity as he spoke. The rest leaned forward in attitude attentive.

“Let's give our next dinner in said haunted house. I suppose we can lease it from its ghostly proprietors, Svend?”

The young Swede laughed dryly.

“The only lease you'll require and the only rent you need pay is the nerve to go and eat your dinner there, Craig. There isn't a black skin in seven counties who could be dragged there after sundown.”

“Good enough!” exclaimed Craig. “The very place to break in my new recruit, Fandab. He'll

serve dinner to us there on the ground floor— By the way, it *has* a ground floor, hasn't it, Svend?"

"Yes."

"Well, say a dinner on the ground floor next Thursday night at twelve, midnight. The mystic hour, eh?"

"I'm game enough," said Crampton, "but, I say, Svend, has the house no owner; does no one live there?"

"Not a soul will claim any connection with the place. To every inquiry I get nothing but a shake of the head or a shrug of the shoulder. The place is ours for the taking, but I'm not so sure I want to take it after what I saw the other evening."

"Overheated nerves, Svend. Everything of the kind rot; perfect rot! I think Craig's idea of the dinner capital. It'll serve splendidly to quell the everlasting boredom of this cursed hole where our respective countries have seen fit to bury us. I'm for it!"

"And I," acquiesced Carl Stroth, the German.

"Agreed around?" inquired Craig, looking his friends over.

Svend, the Swede, hesitated. Then his brow cleared.

"All right," said he, "Thursday at midnight!"

## II.

CRAIG'S new servant, the coolie Fandab, proved a model cook. And as for fear of the supernatural; strange to say, there was none.

"Guess it's because he happens to hail from an outlying province, and don't know the place's reputation, or else my extra pay for the carrying out of the dinner is a strong and bold factor."

Such was Craig's soliloquy.

All day Thursday Fandab had been preparing the meal. He managed to get two fellows of his own saffron tinge to help him convey the eatables to the house while daylight lasted, but when night came they made a mighty get-away.

And so it was Fandab, alone, who waited for the four young diplomats to ride out to their midnight dinner.

Craig was the first to arrive. He tied his horse among some shrubbery and entered to Fandab's bowing with a pleased chuckle.

"Well, well," he muttered, more to himself than to Fandab, "the place is sure some on the creepy. Overgrown, tumbledown, and the genuine article

when it comes to the chilly. And funny enough that is, too, with its location here right on the public road. O-ho, hello, Stroth."

"Well, enough," answered the German showing up in the small glow of Fandab's lantern.

Then the two were joined by Crampton, who clattered up with his English abandon, blurting out in some disgust:

"Well, fellows, Svend has shown the white feather. Or so it seems to me. Literally at the eleventh hour he sends his boy over to my bungalow with the following missive:

MY DEAR CRAMPTON:

Wo to that weak digestion with which you already are acquainted. I have had a most violent attack and though, as you know, I am probably the most interested in the experiment this evening, it will be impossible for me to be present. Please explain for me.

Hastily and very cramped,  
GUSTAV SVEND.

"What think you of that?"

Crampton voiced his disgust with profane embellishment.

"Does look something like cold feet, doesn't it?" admitted Craig.

"Well, now," said the German slowly, "there may be more in this affair than we can see. Shall we go on with the dinner?"

"By all means," exclaimed both the others in unison; and to the leadership of Fandab they groped their way through overgrown foliage to the door on the ground floor, and through that to the front room where, on an extemporized table and lighted by some score of candles, lay the meal which he had been put to such trouble to set in so grotesque a surrounding.

But the young Swede's absence had cast a damper upon the rest. Crampton cursed him roundly, which may have been only a blind to hide the uneasiness which all felt. But at the meal they went.

Craig threw all his lightheartedness to the front; popped an occasional cork, and booted the light-footed Fandab to keep his foot in. But the gaiety was forced.

"To everlasting shades with that superstitious Swede!" growled Crampton. "Of course, there's nothing here out of the natural; but confound him

for dragging us out to such a damp, unhealthy relic to catch a good straightforward death of cold. Deserting us at that!"

Stroth had his glass to his lips. He held it before them, his ear quick to attention. The others noted his movement, and in turn fell silent to listen.

Somewhere in the upper regions of the house came a pattering as of hasty footsteps. This was followed by the sound of a scuffle—the dead thud of a fall; then silence once more.

The friends looked at one another.

"Well," whispered Craig in forced gaiety, "something doing at last!"

He caught up one of the candles and, cautiously followed by the rest, made for a door leading to a hall which seemed to promise stairs to the upper floors.

Fandab, the coolie, with a rapid though silent stride, caught him at the threshold. He merely pointed above and shook his head. To which warning Craig simply booted him another and led on to the foot of the stairs.

Halfway up on his tiptoed course to the top he slipped on one of the steps. This brought his two followers up with him. Together, and by the small light of the candle, they made examination.

Stroth ran his finger along the wood; then looked at it close.

"Blood!" said he decidedly.

A heavy groan from somewhere above them lent credence to his assertion.

"You are armed?" whispered Craig back over his shoulder.

"Certainly," replied Crampton, drawing an army revolver of most practicable caliber.

"Huh!" muttered the German. "But is this shootable game we're trailing? I think not. Shall we go higher?"

"Why not?" Craig had raised his voice somewhat.

As though in reply came another rather more accentuated groan from above.

"I'm, for one," declared Crampton in sudden emphasis, and he started on past Craig, who stood still in indecision.

Four more steps up, his stride was broken by a sprawled something which tripped him quickly to his face, swearing as he fell.

Then from above again, as on floors of tile, came the hasty pattering which they had heard when below. Now, the sound was more distinct;

then it fell to faintness and finally died away, apparently in the rear of the building.

Once more Craig brought forward his candle for an examination.

Crampton was regaining his feet, clearing himself from the object he had fallen over. Together they peered down.

The splutter of the wick in a hasty draft shut off full vision at first, but when the flame finally righted itself to the perpendicular they could make out the prone outline of a body lying at a variant angle with the landing of the stairs as they turned to the second floor.

Craig applied his foot to an easy lift; then followed with an examination with his hand.

"A man, European clothes," was his verdict.

The man lay face down on the slant of stairs, his head shielded, as from a blow, by his right elbow, which was bent across his forehead.

Then Craig's fingers struck an unyielding object. He lowered the light upon it. From out the fellow's back and somewhat more to the right side projected the grotesquely carved handle of a Malay knife.

"Is he done for?" inquired the American of the German, who had stepped up beside him and had followed closely every point of the investigation.

Stroth, who had added some medicine to diplomacy, felt the wrist of the hand which showed in the subdued light above the head.

"Still thumping a bit, but very weak," said he. "He needs immediate attention. Do you think we can carry him down to the table, where we'll have more light?"

"Most certainly," put in Crampton, a man of magnificent physique. "You two fellows take him by the shoulders. I'll manage below here."

And thus, with little difficulty, they brought their burden to the ground floor.

As they approached the fuller glare of the rest of the candles set about the table where they shone through the open doorway, something fell from the wounded man and chinked its way to Craig's feet as he strode under his share of the weight. He shifted his hold to one hand and picked up the object.

"Why, what's this? I know that trinket! I saw it only yesterday."

"What's the row, Craig?" asked Crampton.

"More light will explain," said Craig excitedly.

At the entrance of the three young men bearing

their gruesome find, the face of Fandab shot to a quick alarm, which went to absolute terror when he caught sight of the knife handle.

He made for the door with a slippery stealth.

But Craig, who had by now loosed his grip to Stroth, caught the import of the movement and with quick realization and dispatch he dug the ribs of his servant with the muzzle of his revolver.

"Time for some explanations," said he.

Then while Fandab jabbered his infernal lingo excitedly, they rolled the wounded man over on his back.

Stroth and Crampton sprang up in horror.

"Svend!" they cried in unison.

"I feared so," said Craig, "judging from this."

He held up the object which had fallen from the young Swedish diplomat.

"What is it?"

"His fob, which is of noteworthy and unusual design."

"Yes, but what does this all mean; his being here?" broke in Crampton. "He was in bed sick, wasn't he?"

Stroth shook his head, even as he busied himself with whatever first aid expedients suggested themselves.

"As I said before, there may be more in all this affair than we at first suspected. You remember how wrought up he seemed to be on the very evening we planned the dinner.

"He wouldn't even tell us what it was that had made him put such credence to the uncanny stories of the house. Then his reluctance at first to join us, followed finally by his letter tonight feigning illness, which we now see was only a blind. I tell you there is something behind all this."

The wounded young man here heaved a deep breath under the stimulant that had been forced between his teeth by Stroth. He opened his eyes. Terror showed in them. Then, as he seemed to recognize his friends, he looked as though he were trying to speak. But the effort was apparently too great and he fell back again.

Crampton here interposed:

"Could there have been some influence that brought him here against his will?"

Craig couldn't withstrain a chuckle even as he still probed Fandab with the gun.

"Rather a romantic speech for practical Britain," said he. "An influence? Tangible or otherwise?"

"I don't know," answered the Englishman

lamely, "but this is all so cursed mysterious, you know."

Then Fandab began to tremble again, for overhead other sounds were heard. The pattering of footsteps as before was now accompanied by the grating and sliding across the floor above of heavy objects being dragged.

Craig and Crampton exchanged a quick glance.

"Will you come with me?" asked Craig.

"Yes," answered Crampton simply. "But how about your cursed coolie?"

"Why, he's going to lead the way," answered Craig. "He has already shown some knowledge of this business, so maybe he knows more about this outfit than we think."

Then he turned to Fandab; made his weapon still more prominent; and indicating the foot of the stairs, he ordered:

"Up you go!"

The coolie tottered in his fear, but he obeyed, though still protesting in his mixed vocabulary that he knew nothing.

To his hesitating leadership the two white men again mounted to the upper floor. This time both were provided with candles and matches, though they didn't light them, preferring to grope their way somewhat rather than expose themselves overduly to whatever danger might be before them.

At the top of the flight and just before a doorway which showed up dimly Fandab made a final fevered entreaty to be spared further leadership.

"Here, you infernal, yellow-livered scoundrel. I mean business! Go on or *never* go on."

Craig rang full seriousness into the threat as he again let the circle of the muzzle line itself in Fandab's neck.

The coolie now apparently considered the danger ahead less than this present, or at least the chances of escape greater. Accordingly, with his customary stealth of step he entered a long room which was situated directly over the one they had chosen to dine in. Craig and Crampton followed him close.

The room was somewhat lighter than the hall had been, thanks to unglazed windows which let in, besides, the chill of a rising night wind.

As the frightened Fandab stepped across the threshold, from out the dim shadow of one corner a body hurled itself in fury upon him and after two lunges broke its grip and with a cry of "Fandab!" in

a tone almost sorrowful, ran quickly to the rear of the building.

Crampton took up the pursuit. Through a window went the pursued, and when Crampton reached the sill and looked over he could discover the fellow going down a rope which hung from it. Two others waited below for him.

Quick to the thought Crampton placed his revolver against the rope as it passed over the windowsill and fired. The severed rope and the man it bore fell to those below, and Crampton, through the dimness, could see them make off with their crippled comrade.

"What's the lay?" came a voice from over Crampton's shoulder.

He turned to Craig, who had run up at the shot.

"Where's Fandab?" he asked, without answering the question.

"Knifed, like Svend."

"Dead?"

"No, but mighty near it, I guess."

"Can he talk?"

"Not yet, but I'm for getting some booze of Stroth to make him."

He started to go for the stairs outside. In three steps he fell over a bundle that lay in shadow.

"Another human pincushion?" he growled in disgust.

But examination proved otherwise. He struck a match and lighted a candle.

Before him was a roll of some loose cloth, like sacking, and in this were smaller packages disclosed by a rent which had evidently been made by dragging across the uneven floor.

Together the men bent over one package which Craig broke open with his penknife.

He passed it over to Crampton.

"What do *you* make of it?"

Crampton fingered the contents; applied a pinch to his nose.

"Opium?" he voiced tentatively.

"Exactly!" replied Craig. "And now for Fandab."

With utter disregard for noise he clattered down the stairs, and gave little explanation to Stroth as he snatched a bottle and made up again.

He approached the corner into which the dying coolie had crawled.

Unused to liquor as he was, the effect was the more sudden and strong.

"Will I die?" he queried weakly in his own

tongue.

Crampton, who had been some two years in the country, replied stoically:

"We think you will."

"Yes, better fess up!" broke in Craig in English.

"Do you know who stabbed you?"

"My brother," answered Fandab without emotion.

"Yes, my brother. I will tell all. This house? It had the name of the spirits, you know, the dead. So the stories, the old women had it. I come from far province; my brother, too. We all belong to gang, what you call smugglers. We pass opium over the border. Why not? 'Tis no sin. But you English punish. We must hide the trade. We add to the stories of the spirits. We use the house for our store place. Understand?"

"Yes, as far as you go," broke in Craig, who had caught most of the drift of the broken explanation. "But *you're* no smuggler, Fandab!"

"I know, sir; but I see you one day. I like you, I love you. I become your boy. Then they hate me."

"Yes, but why didn't you put up a vigorous kick; what did you come to this infernal house for, when you knew all about it?"

"I'm your boy, I obey," murmured Fandab.

"Now, ain't that just like a coolie?" growled out Craig in a disgust with which he wasn't quite able to drown his real feeling for the faithful fellow.

He handed the bottle for another swallow; but met no responding touch. He leaned closer and listened. Fandab was dead.

Between them they carried the dead coolie downstairs.

"Well, here we are around the shank of horror at last, and on the up-grade!" cried Craig as they entered to Stroth and his patient, who now sat propped up comfortably, and from whose eyes glowed recognition of events.

"Good boy, Svend. And how are you?"

"Don't make him talk, Craig," interrupted Stroth solicitously. "He's already told me enough to clear up matters."

"Well, we, too, have got some of the lay; but we can't make out where Svend comes in the thing."

"It was a joke," explained Stroth.

"A joke!"

"Yes. He had heard of the house, and just to while away the heavy time of this slow location he trumped up that story of his own former visit here and his fright. Then he balked on the dinner and

sent that letter about being sick, so that he could slip out here and upstairs, where he was fully prepared to make good any stories about ghostly noises and the rest.”

“In other words, you were to be substitute

spook; eh, Svend?”

The young Swede smiled assent, though the American's levity did seem ill-timed and somewhat cruel.