

# The Black Cat

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## “The Heart of God.”\*

BY JOANNA E. WOOD.



THREE men sat in a handsome office-like room in a London house, around a mahogany table across which questions involving millions of money had been decided.

The oldest of the three was a short little man, with white hair and red face, of choleric habit, evidently, and having a due sense of his own importance, which had been very great in India, and was still greater in the monetary world, for he was Sir Lucius Lang, sometime an officer in her Majesty's Indian Service, and now known far and near as a financier. After having survived the fluctuations of the *rupee* for so many years, the vagaries of the stock market merely amused him.

Seated opposite to him was a tall spare man, a man, one would have said, who knew accurately the location of his liver; he had a hook nose — there is much virtue in a hook — of a certain kind, but Arthur Godwin's hook was not Semitic, but of the type which attained apotheosis as an adornment of the Iron Duke. Therefore it indicated ancestors rather than speculative acumen; nevertheless, Arthur Godwin's favorite recreation was to come up to London and indulge in financial flyers.

Birds of various feathers these flyers were, and rarely showed

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homing tendencies, but flew away into the blue and rose perspective of speculative distance, never to return.

The man sitting between Sir Lucius and Godwin was a great contrast to his companions.

He was young, and brown, and lean, with a sunburnt mustache and a square jaw; his eyes were gray and very keen, and his whole appearance was that of a man who had often played for big stakes against heavy odds. Thought and action were simultaneous with him, and there was so much alertness in his pose as to suggest that he had lived among people not above suspicion.

His name was Allan Trask, and he was an American, if any nationality can be rightly given to a man of such cosmopolitan experiences. He had mined gold in California and opals in Mexico; he had sought silver in Peru and dug for nuggets in Australia.

He had lived on horse meat at St. Etienne, when the ponies injured in the mines had been raised to the surface to be converted into beefsteaks; he had supped off grasshoppers in oil in Africa, and breakfasted off blubber amid the eternal snows, and rejoiced over kangaroo tail soup in New Zealand; — and when he found himself at a civilized table displayed discrimination in his drinking and ease in his deportment.

There had been a love story. Reversing national precedent, he had fallen in love with an English girl, and she with him; but there had been rumors, untrue but difficult to meet; his wild ways frightened her, and her people, spicing their tales of him with that devil's salt, a grain of truth, managed to prejudice her judgment (not her heart, for that never wavered), and so they parted. Perhaps Trask's pleading had not been very gentle; he thought of it sometimes and cursed himself for a brute, and entered into enterprises more and more hazardous, just to show the poor opinion he had of his own value.

But he came forth scathless from every danger, and the ache at his heart grew worse. Of all his exploits the last had been the most perilous, but he had succeeded, and the result was brilliant, literally, for it was represented by the magnificent diamond, worth a king's ransom, which lay like a lump of solidified fire upon the center of the table.

He had got it, no matter where, but at the cost of much money and the hourly risk of his life for weeks. Never before had this unsurpassable gem changed hands but at the price of many lives; dynasties had depended upon its possession; it had been the cause of wars, and conflagrations, and insurrections. Men and women had died mistaking its glitter, which dazzled their glazing eyes, for the gleams from the opening gates of paradise. Never before had European eyes beheld it, though the soldiers in India had heard of the glory of the "Heart of God," and many of them had marveled together over it, and wondered if the name was used figuratively, or if there was indeed in the possession of the priests a precious stone which merited the rhapsodies of the natives.

When Sir Lucius Lang left India he had brought with him an Indian servant named Tippoo, a child rescued from the sack of a temple of one of the occult faiths.

This child, gifted with all the subtlety and craft of the East, educated in the more practical, if coarser, ethics of the English, developed into a very handsome man, who, hung with rich Oriental stuffs in winter, or clad in snow-white linen in summer, acted as body servant to Sir Lucius.

He made curries and cooked rice with the art inherent in his race, and always stood behind Sir Lucius's chair at table. If Sir Lucius had occasion to punish Tippoo, he did so characteristically, for, after the regulation toast "to the army abroad" had been drunk, he would launch forth into a description of the Indian mutiny; and with a malignity which would have been fiendish, if it had not been so very justifiable, he described the treachery of the natives and the terrible punishments meted out to them. England's strong hand had fallen heavily in her righteous wrath, and Sir Lucius kept the memory of it alive in the heart of Tippoo, who, during the torture of these recitals, stood livid and trembling, enduring, it would seem, in his own proper person all the agony and humiliation meted out to his treacherous race. And after such an experience he would lie all night in a wide-eyed trance, for the vivid descriptions of Sir Lucius brought back to him with photographic accuracy the panorama of weird, terrible sights he had witnessed, crouched in the judgment hall of the sacred temple.

At first these memories were a meaningless phantasmagoria of horror to him, but as he grew older he began to decipher their import, and, remembering the gorgeousness of the temple, he began to calculate its worth; and whereas he had once trembled before these visions, he now sought them, and with his inherited power of mental concentration set himself to dive deeper and deeper into his childish memories. Thus he succeeded in unrolling the scroll of his experiences back to the very alphabet of his infantile impressions, and he studied their misty outlines till he could read clearly every symbol impressed upon the plastic tables of his memory. He could have told strange tales of the hatching of many devilish plans which ere long perfected themselves in deeds which appalled the whole civilized world; he could have told of the sowing of that fatal seed which bore a terrible blossom of blood and flame; he could have told who breathed forth that mysterious whisper, which, like the hissing of an unseen snake, ran all over India, bidding the brown people rise and slay; he could have told from whence came the strange cakes impressed with the mystic, omnipotent symbol, which were found one morning, three days before the mutiny, in every building wherein men dwelt in India, from the viceroy's palace to the fakir's hut. Mingled with these were other recollections — of priests filled with fanatic faith, who, ere they left their temple to kill and maim and torture, hid the treasure of their gods so cunningly that no mortal man could find it unaided; and piercing far, far back, he recalled how, with splendid procession and solemn promises of human oblations, they had taken the great Heart of God from the wooden statue which held it and hid it away. In the East the heart is supposed to be the genesis of thought, and these priests kept the Heart of God in a gilded wooden statue, to signify that the purposes of God are wrought through perishable mediums and perfected by poor mean mortals.

Tippoo remembered how, when the white unbelievers had visited the temple, they had passed by the wooden statue and gloated with greedy eyes over the gold and silver emblems in other niches; and he remembered, too, how the High Priest had gloomed after them, muttering to himself that the spirit of the true God did not dwell beneath the gay uniform of the English soldier, but beneath the

bare brown skin of the humble priests, even as the great diamond Heart of God was hidden beneath the humble wood.

And one day Tippoo sought audience of Sir Lucius, and standing humbly before him divulged to him the secret of the Heart of God, told him where it was hidden, and offered to supply a map of the location, and sighed with melancholy gentleness as he concluded, “The old gods were perhaps false, but their hearts were good, and such things are greatly prized here, and are of much price.”

Price! Sir Lucius thought he knew better than Tippoo the price of diamonds.

Now, to any one unacquainted with India, this tale would have seemed incredible, but Sir Lucius knew the incalculable riches of the temples, and knew that whenever he wanted it, the most miserable fakir by the wayside could command untold treasures; Sir Lucius had heard of the Heart of God, and there was no doubt in his mind that Tippoo knew whereof he spoke.

But Sir Lucius knew, too, better than most, the watchful dragons of cunning which guard even the ruined temples. He knew the armed silent shadows which grow, it would seem, out of the barren rock to steal after the rash investigator. An Englishman disappears, the vultures hover even more thickly than usual above the courts of the ruined temple, the natives see them and smile.

Sir Lucius had “considered with himself,” and the result was a communication to Arthur Godwin, which brought that gentleman to town in a hurry, and after several hours’ talk across the mahogany table they decided to finance an expedition of one.

It would seem the great difficulty lay here — the man.

But Sir Lucius thought he knew him, he suggested Trask; it was a niece of Sir Lucius with whom Trask had fallen in love, and of all her relatives, the old “fighting uncle” had been the only sympathizer.

Decency made him sympathize sneakingly, Trask was so strikingly ineligible; but, as the old man said with a whole-souled oath, “he feared neither the face of man nor the horns of the devil.” To which his sister, the girl’s mother, remarked austere-ly that the young man seemed “equally free from the fear of God.” Sir

Lucius opened his mouth, but remembering he was no longer a fire-eating soldier, but a peaceable land owner, closed it and grew purple in the face from repressed speech.

When the proposed search for the diamond was suggested to Trask he grasped at it eagerly.

What was life worth to him? Nothing.

So with as sad a heart as ever left England, Trask "set his foot on the ship, and sailed to the other side of the world."

And there he had faced death in every form. From plague, and fever, and starvation; from knife, and poison, and ambushade; from thugs, and reptiles, and wild creatures; from pitfalls, enchantments, and women, he had escaped and brought back the Heart of God.

And there it lay upon the table, undoubtedly the finest diamond in the world. And Sir Lucius had told Trask that his niece Edith had not spoken to him for months, since she had found he had some part in sending Trask into danger; and Trask's lean face glowed with a greater joy than he had felt when, on the throbbing deck of the liner, he had pressed the diamond hard against his breast, and seen the Indian shore grow dim in the distance.

The diamond had been shown to Tippoo, and he was promised a rich reward; but he trembled, and said that, though the old gods might not be powerful any more, yet he would not further anger them by taking money for having betrayed their secrets; it was indeed a terrible thing to have done. "But," he added in Oriental phrase, looking at his master, "love is stronger than fear."

"It is," said Trask below his breath, and for a moment his eyes stung as if with salt water.

The discussion between the three men was now as to the best method of selling the diamond.

Its enormous size forbade any private sale, and they were in no mind to be dispossessed by the crown. It would have to be cut up. It was certainly a terrible shame — still — it meant millions. They could have it cut into many pieces, and yet each would be perfect, and greater than the greatest solitaires.

It was enough to make a man's head swim, certainly talking of it made their throats dry.

"We will have a glass of sherry," said Sir Lucius, and rang for Tippoo.

He gave the order, to which Trask supplemented a request for a glass of water.

“What!” said Sir Lucius. Trask reaffirmed his preference, and Tippoo departed.

“They said once I drank,” he said, “though I never was drunk in my life! But since then I’ve never tasted a drop, just to give the girl an unanswerable argument — if she cares to use it.”

Sir Lucius gave him a great slap on the back.

“Well, drink the water! But it’s the last in my house! I’ve wired for Edith and her mother in terms they won’t disregard; they’ll be here to-night, and you will have some time alone with Edith — if you care to use it.”

Trask reached out his hand and Sir Lucius wrung it, and when he relinquished it Godwin’s palm was waiting. They shook hands across the diamond — the slanting sun rays smote it into flame, and Tippoo entered with the sherry decanter and two glasses, and a huge crystal goblet of water. The three men raised their glasses to their lips; the two sherry glasses were put empty on the table, Tippoo placed them on the tray. A moment after Trask put down the glass of water half full, Tippoo placed it on his tray beside the other glasses. Trask looked from one to the other of the two men and then suddenly cried: —

“Where’s the diamond?”

It was gone.

Tippoo gave such a start that the water in the half-filled glass leaped up in a little silvery wave. Then with the impassivity of the Oriental he turned away. Arthur Godwin’s face was livid, Sir Lucius’s eyes were suffused with blood and his face was purple.

Trask’s eyes glittered fiercely.

“Wait,” thundered Sir Lucius to Tippoo; “stand where you are.” And while the Eastern servant stood in his white draperies, holding the tray in hands that did not quiver, the three men sought the floor, the table, their own persons — but the diamond was gone.

“Strip!” said Sir Lucius briefly to Tippoo.

With a kind of proud humility Tippoo obeyed. Nor was his master content till he stood nude, slender and beautiful as a bronze Hermes before them.

Inch by inch Sir Lucius searched the linen draperies, and the gorgeous silk girdle, and the flat straw slippers, then threw them back with a brief:—

"I was wrong."

Tippoo cast his draperies about him.

"Does the Sahib will that I remain?" he asked, ineffable and touching reproach in his great eyes.

"No; go, Tippoo," said Sir Lucius kindly; a preeminently just man, he already regreted his suspicions.

With melancholy grace Tippoo picked up his tray and departed. He paused at the door.

"It is well that I should be punished by the Sahib's doubts. The great fathers are very angry. It is their vengeance upon me. They have taken back the Heart of God."

He closed the door and the three men looked at each other, and as they looked fear fell upon them—intangible fear of intangible things.

It was broad daylight; the sunlight streamed in at the window.

Trask had brought away the diamond from amid the most insidious dangers; it had been spirited away from beneath their very eyes. A blankness of mind fell upon them. They could not reason, for they had absolutely no hypothesis to go upon.

Suddenly Godwin rose. "I don't wish to be rude," he said, "but, frankly, Sir Lucius, I should be more comfortable out of here."

"I believe I should myself," said Sir Lucius.

Trask rose with them, but his face had grown very stern and set.

"Wait a moment," he said. "I risked my life fifty—no, a hundred times to get that diamond, and now by some infernal diablerie it is whisked away from beneath our very noses, from between our very fingers, from under our very eyes, but I'll find that diamond again if it is on earth. All the magic in hell won't guard it against me. I'll find where that diamond has gone if I have to beg, a fakir in a breech-clout, along the Indian waysides. If you could guess what I've been through! The effort to get it, the unspeakable horror of its surroundings, the mental torture of fear,—for I've known that agony,—the dread-



ful dangers of my return journey, the poisoned food, the benumbing smoke of deadly drugs creeping round me as I slept, and I've passed through these things to be bedeviled in broad daylight! It's intolerable!"

"My boy," said Sir Lucius kindly, "I had no real idea, after all, to what I was sending you. You will forgive me? Edith shall ask you, too, and I think she'll have something to say about the fakir idea. Though perhaps two can play at that game. But, seriously, it is Godwin and I who have failed in this scheme; and, after all, the speculation was not fair, for you hazarded life and limb, and Godwin and I only money, and when you brought the diamond back we failed to keep it. Come back to dinner, both of you, and don't worry over the thing. Edith will have plenty, and Godwin and I can scramble along. Eh, Godwin?"

"Yes, indeed," said Godwin heartily. "Yes, indeed."

Trask's face relaxed.

"Come back early; don't wait for the dinner hour. I say, *did* you ever know such a devilish strange thing?"

They stood for a quarter of an hour together, babbling like boys of their amazement, and then parted.

Trask and Edith were definitely engaged.

Trask's face, which was so strong as to be almost brutal, quivered with tenderness as he bent above the girl whose love had been great enough to overcome her fear of his wild ways and stern face; and Edith knew that never again would he frighten her, for his second wooing was very gentle, and her timorous fingers nestled confidently in his strong, lean hand. Their engagement was not to be too long, but Edith's mother was determined to have it decently conventional; and often, as Trask strode away from his sweetheart, he felt a wicked wish within him that he could drop the old lady down a well or something, not with any desire to injure her, but merely, as he naively said to himself, to get her out of the way for a little while.

For he thought, with tender triumph, that if he held out his arms Edith would slip into them of her own accord, if she were let alone.

The intensity of his love had made his first wooing too stern;

now it had come about that this fire eater trembled at the touch of Edith's fragile hands; only sometimes in the midst of her tyrannies a sudden fright would reassert itself, and then his new-found gentleness exerted itself to reassure her.

But mingled with the glamour of his love dream there was always the stern resolve to find out the fate of the diamond.

Poor Tippoo had had a sad end.

From the day of the diamond's disappearance he had never been well. Afterwards the other servants said he had eaten nothing for days.

He grew thinner and thinner, an unnatural brilliancy dilated his eyes. He had fits of weeping over his master's doubt of him, and Sir Lucius reproached himself bitterly because of his hasty suspicion, and finally Tippoo began to ramble and grow incoherent in his speech, and one night he disappeared and could not be found. He had seemed greatly disturbed that day, muttering incessantly to himself, and declaring to the other servants that his gods and the great fathers were angry at him and were punishing him, and that he was not fit to live. These things were, of course, quite unintelligible to the servants, but Sir Lucius put upon them an interpretation which wrung his generous old heart.

He repeated them to Trask and Godwin, and all three decided that doubtless Tippoo had made away with himself.

Sir Lucius clung to the idea that he might have wandered off while he was not himself, and advertised far and near for any clue. The advertisement was widely spread, and attracted the attention of a rich East Indian student at Cambridge, who, after inquiring particulars from Sir Lucius, supplemented that gentleman's reward by a very liberal one; but poor Tippoo was never heard of. Meantime, Trask studied occultism with the devotion of a *Cheelah*, he found out every devotee in England, he trailed London from one end to the other in pursuit of promises of enlightenment, he consorted with greasy workers of miracles and frowzy mediums, and hobnobbed with fashionable and learned Theosophists; he sought out stray East Indians, and by guile and gold gained entrance to a cleverly contrived shrine where Buddha was adored in the heart of London as in the Eastern jungles; he read deeply, and spent his substance upon rare books of occult lore; he

became an adept in magic white and black, and knew cabalistic words terrible to utter, but none of his cunning enabled him to find the whereabouts of the diamond, or to account for its disappearance.

It is said that one who has ever dealt in diamonds can never free himself from their fascination; and after Trask's romantic association with what was undoubtedly the finest diamond ever brought to England, it is not surprising that his interest was sustained in the precious gems, and that he came little by little to know most of the prominent diamond men in the country. Thus it was that he found himself a guest at a great banquet given by and for diamond men. And very well he was entertained, though the continual talk about diamonds served to make the cogent subject of his unending search unpleasantly prominent in his thoughts. Just as he was slipping into a reverie he was brought out of it by an even heartier laugh than usual, and came back to the scene about him to find that a genial old man who had won wealth from the blue clay at Kimberley was telling stories.

"You needn't laugh," he was saying, "it's quite true! There was Hodgins at Kimberley; he built a house and plastered it outside with rough cast made from the mine waste, and after the rains washed the house it glittered in the sun as if it was frosted, and they picked out hundreds of pounds' worth of diamonds. It was that which led to the present system of searching. Those were great days! Once I went up country to the upper mines and came back minus all my kit but my shirt and trousers, but with half a pocketful of stones; for the excitement ran so high that they wouldn't leave the mines for anything, and clothes were not to be had for love or money. I got a regular sparkler for my watch. That was the time to live — but living was high, too, a guinea a bottle for Belfast ale! I remember Hodgins showing me the great 'Up-country diamond.' That was a gem like a gem! Why, Hodgins dropped it into a glass of water and it was so pure and flawless that you could not see it. It was as transparent as the water, and you'd never dream it was there; it made me perfectly nervous, it was so strange to see it disappear so utterly. A game of 'now you see it and now you don't' played with a diamond worth thousands and thousands of pounds."

Trask heard no more, for the long table with its brilliant lights and flowers, with its many guests and numerous attendants, faded from before his eyes; instead of the great banquet room he saw the little office-like room in Sir Lucius Lang's house; instead of the banquet board he saw the little mahogany table; instead of the long line of jolly men he saw the white face of Arthur Godwin, the purpling countenance of Sir Lucius, he saw this visionary scene in detail, and noted the little wave leap up in the crystal goblet which the gentle Tippoo held.

How simply he had duped them!

Palmed the gem, and dropped it into the water before their very eyes! No wonder he had been so willing to be searched.

This was the occult phenomenon which had so bewildered them. He remembered the symptoms of Tippoo's illness, and his disappearance, and could hardly conceal his wrath.

The next morning but one Sir Lucius Lang, Arthur Godwin, and Allan Trask met again round the little mahogany table, but the terror of mysterious forces no longer made them uneasy; instead, impotent rage knit their brows.

"To think," groaned Trask, "that you two furnished the money, and I risked my life to bring that diamond within the reach of that brown beggar!"

Old Sir Lucius nearly foamed at the mouth when he remembered how he had reproached himself for his suspicions of the innocent Tippoo.

Arthur Godwin did not rage, but he had made one or two very lucky speculations, and he intimated that his check book was at Trask's disposal if he would look up Tippoo.

Trask and Edith had been married five years, and they were the greatest chums in the world, — real comrades, going everywhere, doing everything, together; they had run over to Paris for Easter, and it seemed to them that the beautiful city, having put off the sackcloth and ashes of her Lenten penances, was more gay than ever before. They had been looking at the treasures of the *Rue de la Pair*, for they both had a liking for shop windows, and no windows are so entralling as the jewelers'; and as they walked

along the Boulevard they were attracted by the long line of people waiting to take their turn in entering to view the wonders of the “Cinemetagraphe,” that wonderful development of the kinetoscope, which projects life-size figures upon a screen in such a manner that the real scene and events proceed before the eyes with every movement and gesture true to life. They saw the babies playing by the sea, they saw the blacksmith shoeing a horse, they saw the mischievous gardener turning his hose upon his friend, and then they saw the arrival of a train. They first saw the track stretching in two black lines, then the engine appeared, growing greater and greater till it passed out of sight, and the train halted, and then they saw the passengers descend. One of the first stepped from a first-class carriage, followed by a man who carried his rugs and hat box. He walked straight towards them along the platform till he was in the foreground of the scene; suddenly the changing picture was a blank; then another picture began, but neither Trask nor his wife saw it, for they had clasped each other’s hands in strange excitement. They looked at each other.

“Are you sure?” asked Trask.

“Perfectly,” said Edith. “It was Tippoo.”

For the man they had seen in the changing picture was Tippoo, but dressed in the regular traveling tweeds of an Englishman, and escorted by his valet. With much difficulty, Trask found that the photograph had been taken as a London train arrived at Folkestone to meet the Paris boat, some few months before.

Trask went back to England, and struggled to find some clue, but in vain; and old Sir Lucius raved afresh when he heard the story; in fact, the loss of the diamond itself had not enraged him so much as the idea that Tippoo had a valet.

A few months later Sir Lucius received a letter postmarked India. It was very polite.

*My dear Sir Lucius:*—I am about to give you the information for which you offered a reward of five hundred pounds some six years ago, but as your enterprise in sending to India for the Heart of God for me has made me very comfortable for life, I will not expect you to pay the five hundred pounds; I would advise you to apply it to the promulgation of intelligence among retired army officers, country gentlemen, and young adventurers. I dropped the Heart of God into the goblet of water I was holding, and it was very funny to see you looking for it when it was so near you. It is a great mistake to think

we Eastern people have no sense of humor; I enjoyed this joke much better than you ever will. After leaving your house, I went to Cambridge, having quite sufficient money to establish me creditably at the University. I had ways and means of getting credit upon the Heart of God, which I need not explain. I amused myself much at Cambridge, and spent my vacations in Paris. (You don't go to the best hotels there, or I would surely have run across you.) As I say, I amused myself well in Cambridge, but I found nothing more entertaining than your replies to my letters of inquiry about myself. I was rather more liberal than you in my offers of reward. Still it is only fair to admit that I was hazarding my money on a sure thing. I have, as you see, returned to India, and am enjoying myself hugely; perfecting myself in the mystic lore of my race, and applying some of my university learning to its problems. I am a king in riches, a prince of pleasure, and I am greatly pleased to send you this intelligence of your Tippoo. Should you, or Arthur Godwin, or Trask the heroic, ever care to come to India, depend upon it, you would be well entertained and your time fully occupied. In what school could an Oriental better learn to entertain the stranger within his gates than in such a household as yours? *I remember some of your dinners.* You need send me no word of your coming, for you will be welcome whenever and wherever you set foot upon Indian soil. My people know you well and wait for you, for I have sent them messages concerning you, and they were signed thus — "

Here followed a cabalistic symbol which made Sir Lucius shudder even in England, for it was the same dread hieroglyphic which had been imprinted upon the little ubiquitous cakes which told the brown people to unleash the tigers of the mutiny.

Sir Lucius Lang is a lion-hearted old man, and Trask needs no credentials of courage; but neither of them will ever tempt the tender mercies of the people of the Heart of God.

