

The MALIGNANT PEARL

by
Thomas H. Griffiths



"Before he had a chance to use the weapon again, Luner's baton cracked on his head."

VERY few people know that the Countess of Clannel, the English society beauty, once had a startling experience which almost caused her death. At the time, the society and general newspapers merely chronicled the fact of her illness, they never got the inside history of her mysterious malady.

By a peculiar coincidence, two men whom I know, met in the Cosmopolitan Club, Hamilton, Bermuda. And each had the fragment of a story, which pieced together, gave a clue to the weird experience that nearly caused the death of the beautiful countess.

Randolph Vince, a smart, clean-cut American in the early thirties, knew one-half the uncanny story. Harry Bruce, assistant chief in the Bermuda police force, knew the other part of it.

That Ranny Vince should be familiar with the phenomenon that happened to the countess did not in the least surprize me. His business

(he was attached to one of the departments at Washington, D. C.) took him to many strange places in this world. And Ranny could, whenever he cared to, tell some remarkable true tales, which he invariably described as "little incidents in my career." One of the "little incidents" was revealed in the story of the malignant pearl.

It was Bruce who started the conversation about gems, and pearls in particular. As we sat in the smoking room at the club, chatting, he produced a Bermuda pearl which he gave to Ranny for inspection. Vince examined the gem, then he remarked: "That is a peculiar feature of the Bermuda pearl, they all have a yellowish tinge, though I did see one once that was black. It must have been a freak. And I never want to see another one like it."

"I, too," said Bruce, "know of one black Bermuda pearl. In fact, I had the pleasure of handling it before Sir

Henry Klane, who was once a governor here, bought it and took it to England. But, between ourselves, Vince, I wouldn't have accepted the pearl as a gift. There was *obeah* on it."

"*Obeah?*" I interrupted. "What's *obeah?*"

"West Indian witchcraft," Bruce told me.

"What shape was the pearl?" asked Ranny.

"Irregular, pear-shaped," replied Bruce.

"The same gem," said Vince. "I am positive, the same black pearl that nearly killed the Countess of Clannel. I recollect being told she had got it from someone who had brought it from Bermuda. And there was an evil spell on the gem, eh?"

"Yes," said Bruce, "and West Indian witchcraft is bad stuff. No white man can understand it."

"I believe you," said Ranny. "I saw what the pearl did to the Countess of Clannel, and it was decidedly uncanny. Indeed, in all my travels I never saw anything to equal it for weirdness. I'll tell you what happened."

For obvious reasons, the names mentioned in this narrative are fictitious. But the other facts are as written in this chronicle.

RANDOLPH VINCE'S STORY

IN THE fall of last year [Vince commenced] I was sent to England on special business. Just before I left New York, I wrote to the Duke of Warne, telling him when I was due to arrive in England.

The duke and I had met in Washington, and we had become quite intimate. He had made me promise that whenever I visited England, I would stay with him at his country residence.

Ultimately I reached my destination, and at the Revelle Hotel, Lon-

don, where I usually stayed, I found a letter awaiting me from the duke. In a very cordial manner he renewed his invitation. I decided to accept his offer as soon as I had finished my business. A few days later I was comfortably settled at Langton Hall as one of the Duke of Warne's many guests.

The day after I arrived was the commencement of the Worcester County social season. Arrangements had been made to hold the annual ball of the County Hunt Club in the ballroom at Langton Hall. As a guest of the Duke of Warne, and as a matter of courtesy, I was invited to attend the premier social event of the season.

The function was a remarkably brilliant one. Distinguished men in naval and military uniforms, beautiful women handsomely garbed, made an assemblage remarkable for its variety and brilliance. The jewels displayed by the elegant, graceful women sparkled and glittered, while the red and blue uniforms worn by the men, adorned as many of them were by medals and orders, created a magnificent scene as the color and glitter mingled in the ballroom.

I stood at one side of the room and admired the gay dancers as they circled past me. One pair were especially noteworthy, and my eyes followed their movements as they swirled around the room. Young Lord Danley, tall, handsome and dark, was waltzing with the beautiful Countess of Clannel. And the exquisite loveliness of the consort of the Earl of Clannel was distinctive, even in that gathering of beautiful women. Chatting and laughing, the handsome pair again passed by where I stood. It was then I noticed, as it seemed to me, a spot of blood on the white bosom of the countess. For a moment I was startled by the strange resemblance. Then I smiled, as I realized that the seeming spot of blood could

not be anything other than a dark-colored jewel attached as a pendant to her pearl necklace.

The Duchess of Warne approached me. Banteringly she said, "You American men are like the men of other nationalities!"

"Why, Your Grace?" I asked, surprised.

The duchess laughed, a charming laugh in which I detected roguishness. "You are fond of pretty women," said she, adding, "I saw you admiring Lucille. Do you dance with her this evening?"

"Yes, I anticipate the pleasure," I replied. Then I ventured a question. I knew the information I desired bordered on the personal, but I was so intimate with the duke and duchess that I was sure my inquisitiveness would not seem impertinent to Her Grace.

"Have you noticed the pendant gem on the necklace of the Countess of Clannel, how similar it seems to a spot of blood, Your Grace?"

"No," she said, "I have not. But now you point it out, Mr. Vince, I must admit there is a marked similarity. The gem is a pear-shaped black pearl brought from Bermuda. Lucille added it to her necklace to effect a contrast. She has a penchant for *outré* color schemes."

"The bizarre contrast is most becoming to the countess," I commented. The duchess smiled, then after a moment or two of desultory conversation she left me. I glanced at my program. One more dance, then I would have the delightful pleasure of waltzing with the Countess of Clannel.

The musicians were tuning their instruments as I approached the countess. Charmingly she greeted me, remarking with a smile, "I thought you had forgotten me, Mr. Vince."

"Impossible," I replied, as the orchestra commenced to play a delight-

fully dreamy Hungarian waltz tune. A moment, and we were in the midst of the entrancing dance steps. The countess danced with the lissomeness and gracefulness which supposition claims as a fairy gift. As we lightly glided around the ballroom, conversing on many topics, my eyes involuntarily glanced at the black pearl. The countess noticed my glance. "Are you admiring my Bermuda pearl, Mr. Vince?"

"Yes," I said, somewhat abashed at having been caught staring at the gem, an action which she might have construed as that of an ill-bred person. But I felt reassured when she said: "A beauty, isn't it? I am wearing it for the first time."

"It is a magnificent gem, Your Ladyship," I agreed. And for a while nothing more was said about the pearl.

THE deliciousness of my lovely companion so enchanted me, that even the ordinary polite conversation seemed frivolous. In perfect accord we glided over the floor to the entrancing harmony of the languorous Hungarian music. The atmosphere, redolent with the perfume of violets, seemed sensuous, and my usually prosaic imagination became charged with a fancy absurdly foreign to my nature. I imagined my exquisite companion and I were dancing on the clouds toward an unknown paradise.

Suddenly the idealistic fancy was dispelled, as with dilated nostrils I realized that the aroma of the violets had been replaced by an acrid odor. Momentarily my sense of smell could not analyze the scent. Then I shuddered, as my perceptive faculty recognized the odor. It was that of burnt flesh.

While I was wondering, seeking for a cause of the strange smell, the countess startled me by her peculiar actions. I felt her hand, which was resting on my arm, grip me as if her

fingers had been twitched by a spasm of pain. Her footsteps faltered, then she tripped and nearly fell. In a moment, with my aid she recovered her balance. We stopped dancing, and as I supported her I became aware that there was something radically wrong with the Countess of Clannel.

"Your pardon, Mr. Vince," she said in a tremulous voice. "Would you please escort me to the reception room. I feel strangely indisposed."

"Anything to assist Your Ladyship," I said, distressed by the expression of pain on her lovely face. Her features were drawn, and her eyes reflected anguish. Without doubt, the countess was enduring intense pain; and it was caused by more than mere fatigue.

We passed from the ballroom into the deserted reception room, where I assisted her to a lounge. "Shall I get water for Your Ladyship?" I asked, distressed at the sight of her pallid face.

"No," she said, faintly. "The necklace! Take off the necklace!"

Her fingers fumbled with the clasp at the back of her neck, but she seemed unable to release the fastening.

"Permit me," I said. As I was about to lean over to undo the clasp, I suddenly stopped, for a whiff of the pungent smell of burnt flesh again reached my nostrils. Then, what must have been a diabolical instinct directed my gaze at the black pearl. Mentally I am strong, but what I saw almost caused me to shout with horror. The pearl was no longer black. It had changed to a dull red color, and as I stared at it fascinated, it shimmered and glowed like a red-hot spark on the white bosom of the countess. In the grip of a spell, I stood and stared at the gem. No smoke was perceptible; there was no indication of anything burning, nor could I hear the sizzle of flesh in con-

tact with the glowing pearl. The phenomenon was absolutely inexplicable to me.

An agonizing cry from Her Ladyship startled me into action.

"Take it off!" she cried. Quickly I unloosed the fastening, and then I began to draw the necklace from around her neck. It came easily enough, all except the black pearl pendant. The malignant gem struck to her flesh. With a jerk, I wrenched it out of the hole where it had embedded itself on her bosom, and as I pulled away the pearl, she moaned, then fainted.

Stupidly, for my senses were dazed, I stared at the gem in my hand. Its appearance now was normal, the fire glow had completely vanished. There was nothing to show that it had been any other color than black. Yet on the white flesh of the countess I could see the vivid burn, black and misshapen like the pearl. Mystified, I seemed unable to do anything other than stand and stare at the horrible disfigurement.

A movement by the countess aroused me out of my contemplative mood; her body twitched convulsively, and again she moaned. Carrying the necklace in my hand I hurried out of the room to get assistance. Outside the door of the reception room, I fortunately found a footman, and I sent him to find the Duchess of Warne and the Earl of Clannel, saying that the countess was seriously ill.

A few minutes later they entered the room, and with them came Sir Harley David, the eminent surgeon, who at the time was also a guest of the Duke of Warne. Rapidly I told them of the malignant action of the black pearl.

"Incredible, Mr. Vince!" exclaimed the duchess, horrified.

"It may sound so, Your Grace. But look at the burn. That is corroboration enough."

"Vince is right," said the surgeon

as he examined the hole in the flesh of the countess. "Lucille has somehow received a terrible burn."

Hours later, the Countess of Clannel regained consciousness, but only for a few minutes. For days she lay delirious, constantly raving about the pearl that was burning its way to her heart. A month elapsed before Her Ladyship recovered from the shock.

Later, I heard she had gone for a cruise in the Mediterranean. And I also heard that the Earl of Clannel had removed the malignant black pearl from the necklace, sewed it in a small bag with a weight, and then dropped it somewhere in the Mediterranean Sea. And that was the end of the virulent black Bermuda pearl.

THE KEY STORY OF HARRY BRUCE

A SUITABLE end [commented Bruce]. Yes, a very fitting end. From the sea it came, to the sea it returned. Its destructive propensity is finished. I am glad. I know, Vince, there was *obi* or *obeah* (whichever word you like, they both mean the same), on the black pearl. So I'm happy to know the devilish gem has been put where it can not harm another human being. But I'll tell you the evil history of the pearl and how I came in contact with it. Then you will understand how the Countess of Clannel became an innocent victim of a malignant spell. She was very fortunate; some of the people who handled the pearl died—violent deaths.

A mulatto named Shansun found the pearl. Shansun was the servant of Ferguson, a white fisherman, and the two of them lived alone on Agar's Island. One of the mulatto's duties was the collecting of bait, and out of an oyster gathered for that purpose came the black pearl.

One day the mulatto brought a pail full of oysters into the house, and among the lot there was one with a peculiar humpbacked shell. He

picked it out of the pail and gave it to Ferguson, pointing out the peculiarity in the shape of the shell. Ferguson opened it and found a splendid black pearl. Now among the colored people a superstition is rife that to find and possess a black pearl will bring them good luck and happiness. Naturally, when Shansun saw the pearl he demanded it from the white man. Ferguson obstinately refused to return it, for he recognized its cash—not sentimental—value. Abusive words led to blows, and ultimately the white man and the mulatto fought for possession of the black pearl. Shansun was badly beaten, and with the beating he professed to renounce his claim to the gem.

The same afternoon, Ferguson and Shansun rowed in a skiff to Hamilton. The white man had the pearl, and he intended to sell it to Jan Van Dorp, an old Dutchman who dealt in pearls and native curios. Leaving the mulatto in charge of the boat, Ferguson went to the house of the dealer in gems. He was unaware that his order was disobeyed and that he was being stealthily followed. Shansun was trailing him.

As Ferguson entered the house of Van Dorp, the mulatto made his way, craftily and unseen, to the rear of the building. There he met Mammy Bean, an old West Indian negress cook, who with Mrs. Wain, a white housekeeper, comprized the menage of the Dutchman.

To Mammy Bean, Shansun told the story of the finding of the black pearl, not forgetting to mention that he thought Ferguson was about to dispose of the gem to her master. The news interested the old negress. She wasn't grieved at Shansun's loss—that was a matter of no interest—but her nimble brain instantly concerned itself in a plot to acquire the pearl. She had a reputation among the colored people as a sorceress, and the possession of a black pearl would

enhance her fame. But first, as a necessary precaution, she desired to know more than the mulatto had told her. This desire could be easily accomplished, for the white housekeeper was away shopping and she would not be likely to return for some time. Mammy Bean quickly decided that eavesdropping was the best way to verify Shansun's story.

Cautioning him to be quiet, she led the way through the house to a front room where Van Dorp and Ferguson were negotiating. The entrance to the room was covered by a portiere, and from where the listeners stood in the hall, the conversation of the white men, as they haggled over the price of the gem, came distinctly to their ears. They heard Van Dorp make a final offer in cash for the pearl, and they heard Ferguson accept the offer, although he insisted the black pearl was worth much more. Then Ferguson warned the Dutchman to put the pearl in a safer place than the tin box where he usually kept his collection of gems. But Van Dorp scoffed at the suggestion of robbery, even though Ferguson insisted that the colored people placed a sentimental value on the black pearl.

Mammy Bean had heard enough to convince herself that Shansun's black pearl was indeed a reality. Motioning to the mulatto to follow her, she rapidly and silently retreated to the rear of the house. There she impressed on Shansun the necessity of getting back to the boat before Ferguson came out of the house. The old negress had all the knowledge she required, and she planned to steal the black pearl without the aid of the mulatto.

THE next morning Jan Van Dorp was found in bed, murdered. As our chief was away in New York on a vacation, the responsibility of probing the crime rested on my shoulders, so as soon as I got the news of the

murder, I lost no time starting an investigation. With Luner, a colored detective, and Roane, our cleverest white detective, I arrived at the scene of the crime a few minutes after receiving the telephone message.

From Mrs. Wain, the widow who kept house for the old man, I got the pith of the tragedy. Briefly she told me that she had gone to arouse Van Dorp, as was customary every morning. She thought it strange that this morning he didn't answer her call. Opening the door of his bedroom, she glanced inside. To her horror she could see a large patch of blood on the white counterpane. Not waiting to investigate, for she instinctively felt that her master had been slain, she telephoned us. More than that, the agitated woman did not know. We left her and entered the bedroom.

On the bed lay Van Dorp, quite dead. From the nature of the fatal wound, I surmised that the murderer had thrust a dagger through the white quilt, into the heart of the old man. The position of the body, and the orderliness of the bedclothes, showed that the victim had been killed while asleep. Thus it was plain, if robbery were the object of the assassin, Van Dorp had moved in his sleep and so received his quietus. Satisfied as to the correctness of the theory, we then began a search of the room for possible clues.

A cursory glance indicated that everything was in order. None of the furniture had been disturbed, the windows were all fastened, and the inside shutters latched. It was not until Roane, who had been searching in the bureau drawers, found a flimsy tin cash-box that we got the semblance of a clue. The lock on the box had been forced open.

"Robbery!" said Roane, bringing out the box for a closer inspection. He raised the lid with the expectation that his opinion would be justified. But, much to our astonishment, in-

stead of the box being empty, it contained thirty yellowish pearls of various sizes. The find completely upset the theory of robbery as a motive for the crime. Leaving Luner and Roane to continue the search of the bedroom, I went to the kitchen. My intention was to question Mammy Bean, although I didn't feel very sanguine about getting much information from her.

As I entered the kitchen, the old negress, who sat rocking herself, stared curiously at me. That she understood the purpose of my visit was obvious, but whether she knew anything more than Mrs. Wain about the crime was a matter of conjecture. After some adroit questions, which she answered quite frankly, I reached the conclusion that Mammy Bean knew almost nothing of the murder. Thinking thus, I turned to leave the kitchen, but before I left I somehow felt prompted to try a bluff on the old crone. A few minutes previously, she had told me a white man had visited Van Dorp the day before, but she didn't know the name of the visitor. Her ignorance as to the identity of the man may have been an evasion, so I resolved to test her veracity.

"What did you say was the name of the man who saw your master yesterday?" I asked, sharply.

"Massa Ferguson," she replied, committing herself.

"Ha!" I said, elated at having drawn the information; "and what did Ferguson want? You may as well tell me, Mammy Bean. If you know it was Ferguson, you are sure to know the nature of his business with your master."

"He sold a black pearl. I listened to their talk," she told me sullenly.

A black pearl—that was indeed news to me. My astuteness had been amply justified, for the old negress had by a slip of her tongue given me a lead to a palpable clue. Robbery,

after all, had been the cause of the murder of Van Dorp.

Realizing from the sullen demeanor of Mammy Bean that to question her further would be useless, I hurried out of the room. My lead pointed to Ferguson for additional information.

Acquainting Roane and Luner with the knowledge I had gained from the negress, I ordered them to stop the search. We had now to seek Ferguson.

Half an hour later, the bow of the police launch grounded on the beach at Agar's Island. Leaving Luner in charge of the launch, Roane and I walked along the path that led to Ferguson's hut. As we approached the place, Roane remarked that everything seemed quiet, adding that perhaps Ferguson and Shansun were away on a fishing trip.

I knocked on the door of the hut, and not receiving an answer I tried the latch. The door opened, and we stepped into a room, which the fisherman used as a living room. Roane rapped on the table and shouted for Ferguson. There was no reply, so thinking that he might be sleeping I drew aside a curtain that separated the bedroom from the living room. Stepping inside, I was startled at what I saw. Ferguson lay stretched on the floor, and his skull had been split.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Roane, he having followed me into the room, "someone must have given him a terrible blow on the head. Is he alive?"

"Just alive, and that's all," I said, as I stooped and examined the injured man. His pulse was weak, his breathing stertorous. Unless I was mistaken, Ferguson had almost reached the last lap of his earthly race.

In the meantime, Roane hurriedly searched the room. From under the bed he brought out a billet of hard cedar wood; on it there was blood and hair.

"Here's the weapon, been thrown under the bed," he said. "But I can't find another trace of his assailant."

"Never mind," I told him, "that can wait. We've got to rush Ferguson to the hospital."

I stooped for the purpose of lifting the injured man at the shoulders. Just as I was going to grasp him, he opened his eyes and stared at me. Quite distinctly he said, "Shansun. Last night. Beware the black pearl!" A gasp, a quiver of the body, and Ferguson passed away.

"Did you hear that?" I asked Roane.

"Yes," he replied.

"Shansun is our man," I said. "He's responsible for both murders."

CARRYING the body of Ferguson, we returned to the launch. I told Luner the details of the second crime. My recital of the facts did not greatly astonish the colored detective.

"The black pearl, sir, is at the bottom of the murders," he remarked. "Shansun either has it now, or else he has tried to get it. While you were away I strolled along the beach, and I discovered that Ferguson's skiff is missing from its moorings. In my opinion, the mulatto has taken the boat, rowed over to Main Island, and is now in hiding."

Luner's deductions seemed plausible. There was nothing to be gained by hunting for Shansun on Agar's Island. So we headed the launch back to Hamilton.

At headquarters, I immediately issued orders for the apprehension of Shansun. With his capture I felt certain we should have the murderer in our grip, together with the malignant pearl, the cause of all the trouble.

All day I stayed in the office anticipating the capture of the mulatto, but as the time passed and the men

engaged in the hunt reported failure, I realized that somehow he was managing to elude us. Of course, I also knew, his capture was inevitable in a few days' time. Meanwhile, in view of Mammy Bean's connection with the case, I decided to hold her as a witness.

At dusk, Luner and I started from headquarters with the intention of bringing in the old negress. Leisurely, we sauntered along the Serpentine Road toward the Van Dorp house, and nothing happened to stay our progress until we had arrived at the big rubber tree, which stands at the side of the road, a few hundred yards from our destination. In the dim light we could see two men struggling beneath the tree.

"A fight!" exclaimed Luner, drawing his baton. Together we rushed toward the combatants, and were only an arm's length away from them as one of the men fell to the ground. The other man turned and fled. It was only the matter of a few yards before I grasped the fleeing man by the shoulder. He turned and faced me, and as he turned, a knife flashed in his hand. As he stabbed at me I avoided the blow by an adroit twist, and before he had a chance to use the weapon again, Luner's baton cracked on his head. Without even a groan, he dropped to the ground unconscious. Luner picked up the knife, which was smeared with blood, then he peered into the face of my assailant.

"Jonty Bean, Mammy Bean's son," he said, astonished.

"Jonty Bean!" I repeated, equally surprised. "I wonder where he fits into this puzzle? Put the handcuffs on him, Luner. We'll take him back to the tree."

Carrying Bean we walked to the place where the other man still lay prostrate. Laying down our manacled prisoner, we both looked at the man who had been struggling with

Jonty Bean. Simultaneously, we both recognized him.

"Shansun!" I exclaimed, while Luner gave a low whistle.

The mulatto stared at us, then he feebly tried to raise himself. But his effort was futile; groaning, he sank to the ground.

"I'm done, Massa Bruce," he mumbled. "Jonty Bean's stabbed me in the back. He thought I had the black pearl."

AN HOUR later, Mammy and Jonty Bean were in cells, while Shansun was in the hospital. With Roane, I sat at the bedside of the mulatto taking down his ante-mortem statement, for Shansun was almost due to pass, another victim to the malignancy of the black pearl. Much of his story I have told you, but to enlighten you on some points, I will give you a summary of the mulatto's death-bed statement:

Shansun found the pearl. It was taken from him by Ferguson. Ferguson sold the gem to Van Dorp, and the mulatto and Mammy Bean listened to the negotiations. That night, in a spirit of revenge, Shansun split Ferguson's skull, stole the white fisherman's boat and came to Hamilton with the intention of stealing the pearl from Van Dorp. Previous to the attempt at theft, the mulatto circled around the bungalow, endeavoring to find the easiest point of entry. In his search he came to a window shutter, and part of one of the wooden laths had been broken off. Peering through the crack, he saw it was the old Dutchman's bedroom. Van Dorp was in bed, asleep, and the room was dimly lighted by a coal-oil lamp, for burning a light at night was one of his fads. As Shansun looked into the room, he was startled to see the door being cautiously opened. Jonty Bean entered, followed by Mammy Bean, and they went straight to the bureau where Van Dorp kept

his box of pearls. As Jonty Bean pulled open the drawer, Van Dorp moved in bed. Then Jonty Bean stabbed the old man. After the murder he forced open the box. From the gesticulations of rage they both made as they examined the contents of the box, Shansun surmised that the black pearl, for which they were looking, had vanished. Then the mulatto fled from the scene. He went to the big rubber tree, for he knew that in the crotch of the tree there was a hollow of sufficient depth to conceal a man. All day he had lain hidden; at dusk he sneaked out with the intention of begging some food off Mammy Bean. Jonty and his mother were conversing at the rear of Van Dorp's house, when Shansun arrived there. They accused him of knowing the whereabouts of the black pearl, if he hadn't actually stolen it. The mulatto protested, declaring his innocence, then, becoming afraid of the threats of Mammy Bean, he ran away. Jonty Bean followed him, and in the fight that ensued, Shansun got a fatal wound. The mulatto swore he had not seen the pearl since it was in the hand of Ferguson.

That was Shansun's ante-mortem statement. It gave me a solution to the murders, but I was still puzzled as to the whereabouts of the black pearl.

Back at headquarters, I ordered that Mammy and Jonty Bean be brought from the cells. Now I had the deposition of Shansun, I had to charge Jonty Bean with the murder of Van Dorp, and Mammy Bean with being an accessory to the fact. While I awaited their arrival, I commenced to open the mail which lay on my desk. Until then I had been forced to neglect the official correspondence. The first letter I handled was in a thick, foolscap envelope. It was addressed to the chief, but in his absence I had authority to open all correspondence. I took the enclosure

out of the envelope, then I stared mystified, for a dozen blank sheets of writing paper had been used as a packing for another small envelope. I opened the smaller envelope, there was a letter inside, and also to my great astonishment—the black pearl.

I read the letter, it had been written by Van Dorp. He had penned:

“I have a premonition, which refuses to be banished, that the black pearl will be a cause of evil to me. Perhaps my mind has been influenced by the fear of the pearl, which seemed to possess Ferguson, the man from whom I bought the gem. He told me the colored people value the pearl as an emblem of luck, and they would have no scruples about stealing it. Ferguson’s warning is good, so I have devised a plan to checkmate the possibility of a theft. Unknown to Mrs. Wain, I have put the pearl, together with this letter to you, in the middle drawer of the bureau in her room. With it, I have placed another letter addressed to her, which instructs her to mail the large envelope to you, should anything happen to me. Fear of a calamity has urged me to adopt this plan. Yet for all my fear, there is some satisfaction in knowing that I shall have outwitted the attempt of anyone who tries to steal the pearl.”

As I finished reading the letter, I smiled at the old Dutchman’s grim humor. Even while covered by the shadow of the unknown, Van Dorp could not resist the temptation to joke.

Picking up the pearl, I looked at it curiously. It was a good-colored, pear-shaped gem, and as I gazed at it, I pondered on the fate of the three blood-victims it had already claimed since it had been salvaged from the sea.

The entrance of the sergeant and the prisoners aroused me out of my imaginative mood. As the law demands, I cautioned them, then charged Jonty Bean and his mother with the murder of Jan Van Dorp. After I had finished, I picked the

pearl off the desk and showed it to Mammy Bean.

“Was it for this your master was murdered?” I asked.

The expression changed on the face of the old negress. From the sullen, defiant look she had shown as she listened to the charge of murder, her face became distorted by a spasm of intense rage. Her mouth twitched and her body quivered, as she mumbled: “The black pearl! Where did you get it?”

“From Mrs. Wain,” I said.

She stepped toward me, her hands outstretched as if she intended to grasp the gem. Then, as if her progress had been stayed by an invisible power, she stopped and laughed—a low, weird cackle.

“The black pearl!” she shrilled. “The black pearl, and there’s *obi* on it. May it bring disaster, evil and death to those who touch it! May it blind the eyes of those who admire it! Blackness it is, and naught but blackness shall it give forth! May it sear and scorch the flesh of any woman who dares to——”

The dreadful incantation suddenly stopped. The old crone raised her hands to the heavens, then uttered a hideous cry as she fell to the floor with all her faculties completely paralyzed. A stroke, from which she never rallied, had seized her.

Her son, Jonty Bean, was convicted and hanged, thus making the fifth victim of the malignant pearl.

Despite the evil reputation of the black pearl, Sir Henry Klane bought it from the executors of the estate of Jan Van Dorp, and I often used to wonder whether the malignant gem had harmed anyone else. In my opinion, Vince, the Countess of Clamnel was lucky—very lucky, I should say, to escape death.

