

The Pale Ape

M. P. Shiel

Table of Contents

<u>The Pale Ape</u>	1
<u>M. P. Shiel</u>	2

The Pale Ape

This page copyright © 2002 Blackmask Online.
<http://www.blackmask.com>

"A big thing of a pig."—Aristophanes.

Yesterday again I stood and looked at Hargen Hall from the lake; and it is this that has brought me to write of my life in it. Wintry winds were whistling through the withered bracken and the branches, whirling withered birch-leaves about the south quadrangle; and no birds sang.

When I first entered it I was a girl, one might say—gay enough; but now I have known what one never forgets; and the days and the hairs grow grey together.

Five titled names among my friends gained me an entrance to Hargen in the fall of the year '08. I arrived on the evening of 10 th November; and shall never forget the strangeness of the impression made on my mind that night: for even ere I rounded into sight of the house, the sound of the waters far off filled me with a feeling of the eerily dreary—the house being almost surrounded with mountain and cliff, down which a series of cascades shower; and that night I had some difficulty in catching quite everything that was said to me, though in two or three days, maybe, my ear became used to the tumult.

It was four days before I met Sir Philip Lister himself—Davenport, the old butler, told me that his master was "indisposed"—but Sir Philip sent me a polite missive inviting me to take things carelessly a little: so I spent the first days in learning my pupil's moods, and in roaming over the place, from "Queen Elizabeth's Room"—behind the bed still hung a velvet shield brodered with the royal arms in white wire—to the apes and the cascades. A sense of forlornness pervaded it all, for scarcely ten of us were in all the desert of that place, with an occasional glimpse of two or three gardeners, or a groom. The kitchen was now a panelled hall like a chapel, with windows of painted glass containing the six coats-of-arms of the Lister Lynns, a hall in whose vastness the cook and her assistant looked awfully forlorn and small; and hardly even a housemaid ever now entered all that part of the east wing which had been singed by a fire fifty-five years since.

It was on the fourth forenoon, a day of "the Indian summer," that my pupil took me to see the apes. There were three of them—two chimpanzees, one gibbon—in three rooms of wire-netting close to the east line of cliffs, i e., about six hundred yards from the house. There, chuckling and chattering in the shadow of chestnuts, they lived their lives, anon speculating like philosophers upon their knots, or hearkening to the waters which chanted near in their ears. And there was a fourth room of netting in the row, but empty; as to which my pupil said to me:

"The one that used to be in this fourth room was huge, Miss Newnes, and had a pale face. He died some time before I came to Hargen: but his ghost walks when the moon is at the full."

"Now Esmé," I muttered. (Her name was Esmé Martagon, daughter of the Marquis de Martagon and of Margaret Lister, Sir Philip's sister; the child being at this time twelve years of age, and an orphan—a rather pretty elf with ebon curls, but as changeable as the shapes of mercury, now bursting with alacrity, and now cursed with black turns of sadness.)

"But if I have seen it?" she gravely replied, gazing up at me with her great eyes.

"The ghost of an ape, Esmé," I muttered.

For answer, flying off into vivacity, she cried to me:

"Come, you shall hear it!"—and she led the way northward through the park, until we walked down a dark path tremulous with spray, where one of the smaller waterfalls came down. By stepping on the tops of rocks in its froth, one could get, in the rear of the torrent, into a grot, where the greenery grew very vigorous and gay from the perpetual spray; and when I had followed Esmé's career into this hollow in the rock, she hollaed into my ear in

The Pale Ape

opposition to the tons of thunder sounding down: "Now, listen a little: this one is named 'The Ape.' "

For some minutes—three to six—I heard nothing but the burden of the cascade's murmur, and was now about to say something sceptical, when there sounded what I am bound to say affected me in a rather startling way—a sound very sharp and energetic—the chuckle, chuckle of a monkey—most pressing, most imperative, in its summons to the attention. It was over in a moment; but presently came again: and in the course of half an hour's listening it came alto-gether five times, not quite at regular intervals, but still with a kind of periodicity: and I concluded that some small cause, perhaps only a condition of the wind, acted ever and anon to modify the cataract's tract, and produce this curious cackling.

My pupil hollaed to me: "And if you kept on waiting to hear, and listening to it, do you know what would happen to you, Miss Newnes?"—and when I asked what, she called:

"You would go stark mad!"

"Not I," I said.

One of the shadows darkened the child's face; and presently she remarked: "I should, I know.

Three of the ladies of the Listers, and one of the Lynns, have—among them my mother's mother.

It is in the blood, I think."

I started!—for I now suddenly believed her. Indeed, to my consciousness, there was something ironic in the torrent's chuckle, and at once, taking the child's hand, I said: "Come."

Late in the day when we were together in what is called "the Great Hall," Esmé, ever sage beyond her age, again spoke of the chuckling cascade, begging me not to mention or show it to her Cousin Huggins when he came: for a young man of this name, who had hardly been at Hargen since he was six, was coming from India in some months, and was expected to spend a month with us.

It was that night that, for the first time, I saw Sir Philip Lister: for he dined with Esmé and Mrs.

Wiseman and me in the main building dining-room, the old Davenport waiting upon us in state with his silent footsteps, we five making a pretty insignificant group in that great room, whose array of windows have a south aspect upon the south quadrangle.

It has (or had) tapestry all round, and rows of Jacobean carving-tables, which give the room an air of very gloomy state; and a wood-fire bickered on the iron-work fire-back, under whose oak over-mantel Sir Philip sat with Esmé and me ten minutes, then took himself away into his own sequestered nook of the house.

Two days after this he again had dinner with us, and again the day after that; but that third time the child, in one of her chatterbox fits, chanced to observe that "Uncle Philip is lending his presence since Miss Newnes has come"—and like a bird that shies Sir Philip showed himself no more to us for many days.

I regretted this, for his presence interested me, his manners were in such a high degree grave, dignified, and gracious. He was big, and, if not handsome, interesting to the eye—quaint, one might say—his face smooth like an actor's, his hair longer than usual, with great owl-eyes, whose glowering underlook was thronged, to my thinking, with mysteries of sorrow—something shifting, though, uncandidly shy, in them. His age I guessed to be about forty-five.

He was engaged in the writing of what I heard was "a great work," six volumes long, on "The Old Kingdom" (fourth of sixth dynasty of Egyptian Kings), and lived a life of such privacy, that it was three weeks ere I met him afresh. Meantime, Esmé and I entered upon the course of our adventurous studies—"adventurous," for never for two hours together was my pupil the same girl. Esmé had fits of headache; and she had fits of reading, when she feasted upon volumes with a hungry vulture's greed; and she had fits of indolence, dormouse torpors, fits of crying, dark-minded lamentations, fits of flightiness, of crazy dissipation, of craving for—wine. As for her knowledge, it was astonishing in such a child, and she anon plied me with queries to which I could find no reply.

On a forenoon in the fourth week, when she was feeling out of sorts, we were sauntering in the park, when, for once, I saw Sir Philip out of doors. We came upon him with his face against the ape-house netting, gazing in at the gibbon—so eagerly, that we were near him ere he seemed to hear us. When he suddenly saw us, he stood struck into a posture as of suspense, but presently was very affable in his reserved manner, and conversed with me some minutes about the apes and their various traits. They had the names of Egyptian kings, the chimpanzees being Pepy II.

and Khety, and the gibbon Sety I; and at the gibbon Sir Philip shook his finger, saying with a playful solemnity: "That fellow! That fellow!"—I had no idea what he meant.

The Pale Ape

Suddenly, in the midst of our talk, he—with a certain awkwardness of his lids—proposed a picnic—luncheon out of doors to which Esmé and I readily assented. But three minutes afterwards he started, furtively murmuring the words: "I must be getting back to work," and was gone—to my astonishment!

After this he again made himself very scarce for three weeks. Esmé and I, meantime, got into the habit of spending our hours of labour in the great hall, sitting on a day-bed that lay in the solar-room gallery there—the gallery from which of old one gazed down upon the retainers at table below; and those days of my life, that I whiled away in that place, are to me at present days touched with much strangeness and a tone of Utopia. But the great place was quite plain and empty—a plain ceiling, plain white walls, oak-panelled half-way up: only, as it was lighted by fourteen great windows with shields of painted glass, when the sun glowed through them, it transfigured that old room into glory-land. . . . But it is gone from me now like a dream, and I shall not see it again.

It was on the Thursday afternoon of my thirteenth week at Hargan that I received from Sir Philip Lister a singular missive: he had injured his thumb, he said, and wished to know if I would "kindly write from his dictation." But what, then, I asked myself, was to become of Esmé meantime? I did not wish to leave the child! However, I could not say no: and so entered that day the sacred den. He, with his fingers in a sling, instantly jumped up with a gush of apologies, showering upon me a thousand thanks that were at once gushing and shy, till the shyness triumphed, and he was suddenly silent and done. Then, I sitting at an old abbey-table, he on an old farm-house settle, he dictated to me with his eyes closed, in a low tone, all about Khufu, and Khafra, and the things of "the Pyramid Age," until I had the impression that he was himself something Egyptian and most ancient, and I with him, and in which age of the world we were I was not at some moments certain. In the midst of the dictating he all at once pressed his left palm upon his forehead, as if tired or muddled, his eyes tight shut; and, jumping up, he muttered to me, "thank you! thank you!" offering me his hand. Some of his actions had a wonderful swiftness and suddenness; and that hand of his which I touched was as chill as snow: so that I made haste from him.

That night I retired, as usual, soon after eleven to my room, which was in a rather remote and lonely region of the house; and was soon asleep. Two hours later I awoke terrified—I could not quite tell why—but so terrified, that I found myself sitting up in bed—with a singular sound, or the memory or dream of a singular sound, lingering about my ears: and I was trembling, my brow was wet with sweat. Through my two windows, which stood open, shone the full moon's light, lying over the floor, lighting the stamp-work tapestry on my right; and I could hear the night-breeze breathing drearily through the leaves of the cedar, some of whose branches, held up with chains, brushed my panes. For some minutes I sat so, hearing my heart beating in my ears, the breezes shivering through the tree, the streams showering, the soundlessness of the house and hour, and as conscious of some living spirit hovering round me as though I saw it. If it had lasted long, I must have lost consciousness, or else cast off the oppression of it with a shriek: but presently something reached my ear—a chuckle, a little giggle of glee, just distinct enough to convince me that it was due to no lunacy of my ear: and immediately, with a creeping in my hair, but a species of rage and desperation elevating me, I was out of bed, and at one of the windows:

for just after the chuckle a sharp rush through the leafage of the cedar seemed to reach me, and I rushed to see.

What I saw made me faint—whether instantly or after some seconds I cannot say: I know that when I came to my senses I was seated on the floor with my forehead leaning on my old oak chair, and the tower-clock was now sounding the hour of three. But however soon I may have swooned after seeing it, it was not so instantly that I could have the slightest doubt as to the actualness of what my eyes saw. For though the moonlight left the interior regions of the tree's leafage in some obscurity, I was sure that some brute of the ape species with a pale face was hanging there in the cedar-hanging head-downward among the network of chains and branches in such a way as to see into my chamber; and I have an impression of hearing—either before I fell, or through my swoon afterwards—a succession of chucklings; and then a voice somewhere remonstrating, pleading, commanding, in a secret species of shout; and then a strangled outcry of horror, of anguish, somewhere, all mingled with a dream of the chuckle of the chuckling stream.

But the strongest of my impressions was undoubtedly that drowning outcry of horror—an impression so strong, that I could hardly believe it to be a dream, or all a dream. This cry was somehow connected in my mind from the first with old Davenport; and this feeling was confirmed in me when Davenport was nowhere to be seen

The Pale Ape

the next day, nor for four days after.

Mrs. Wiseman, the housekeeper, who for days was pale, and occasionally fell into a vacant staring, told me that Davenport was "suffering." She asked me no questions as to the night, but I twice caught her eye piercingly bent upon me with a meaning of inquiry, of anxiety, in it; and the same thing was true of Sir Philip when, three days later, he appeared towards evening: for he took my hand with a tender solicitude, and a lingering look of question in his gaze. As for Davenport, when I next saw him it was under a tree in the park, where he sat like a convalescent, in his flesh that pathetic pallor of the flesh of aged people who have passed through an illness; and the wrappings round his neck could not wholly hide from my eyes that his throat had been most brutally bruised.

During those days it was as if a blow had fallen upon Hargen. Esmé no longer laughed, and a lower tone of talk overtook us all. It was obvious that each held the consciousness of a secret which none dared breathe to another; and in vain I consumed days of musing in seeking to see into the meaning of these things. For my part, I was ailing, nor could quite hide it. I had the thought of moving out of my room, which I now shrank from entering even in the day-time, but did not care to show so openly that I was afraid. Through the nights I burned a light, but slept with my nerves awake. Not that I was ever of a very nervous temperament, I think: but terror infected me like a sickness in those days; the stare of eyes of affright in the night was ever present in my imagination; and Hargen soon grew to be to my haunted heart the very home of gloom. Then one day, on a sudden, all this trouble of mind rushed away from me like a shadow; and my being galloped into a mood of gladness in which gloom was abolished, and I forgot to be appalled in the dark.

I will tell of it very briefly. It happened that one afternoon when Esmé and I were sitting listlessly in that solar-room gallery, an open grammar lying idle between us, suddenly behind us, there rose out of the floor, as it seemed, a young man who clapped his fingers over Esmé's eyes, smiling with me the while. "Cousin Huggins!" the child cried out—much surprised, for Huggins Lister was not expected at Hargen for some days yet. He caught her up in his big arms, and kissed her like a gun, for he was a being made all of ardours and horse-play: and then he looked into my eyes, and I looked into his eyes.

It was as if I had always known him—long before I was born; and what hurried me more into the sort of maelstrom in which I was now caught was the circumstance, that on the day after that first day Esmé took a chill, remained in bed, and I was all alone with Huggins Lister in that wilderness of Hargen. The young man was, or pretended to be, interested in old things, and would have me show him all the cassone and old needlework, the Spanish glasses giving their glints of gold, the old girandoles with their amorini. He dined with me, we two alone, and Mrs.

Wiseman: for Sir Philip more than ever kept himself to himself. Only, on the fourth evening when Huggins Lister and I were walking in the park, Sir Philip suddenly appeared before us, walking with precipitate steps the other way; did not pause, nor utter a sound, as he passed by us with a bowed brow, his hat raised; but when he had gone some way beyond us, he stopped, and—shook his finger at us! was going, too, I am sure, to venture to say something, but failed; and suddenly was gone on his way again. I remember being very offended at the moment: but a moment more, God forgive me, had forgotten that Sir Philip Lister lived.

I showed the young man the apes, and the Queen's Room, and the cascades, save one, and the ivory inlay of the two Spanish chests, and the Tudor fireplaces, and what was in "the long gallery"; and still he wished to see things. And just under the window that lights the great staircase, there stands on the landing a sedan-chair painted with glaring variegations, the window-glass casting the gauds of the six coats-of-arms of the Lister-Lynns upon the already gaudy chair: in which chair he got me to sit—it was high noon, on the open stair, but we were as solitary there as if night veiled us in a monastery; and, indeed, all that waste of Hargen seemed but made to beguile and mislead our feet to our fate—he got me to sit in it, I say, and then, having me well in his bondage in the sedan-chair, began to sob to me with passion; and when I hid away my face for pity of him there in his passion on his knees, and dashed one wild tear from my eyes, the young man ravished my lips with his lips, there in the chair on the stair that day. I could not help it, for in respect of me Huggins Lister came, and saw, and conquered! and I was as one drugged with honey-dew, and dancing drugged, in Huggins Lister's hands.

Also, the young man persuaded like a hurricane! and hurried me as madly into marriage as those sand-forms of the sand-storm which madly waltz into oneness. Within six months, he said, he would arrange everything so as to proclaim the marriage; but meantime it must be secret, and must be immediate! Against this tyranny I made a feint of resistance; but half-heartedly; and it availed me nothing: indeed, he was dear to me, and near, and had me

The Pale Ape

all in the hollow of his hand and heart. And so one forenoon I stole out of Hargen gates, and met him at a house in St.

Arvens townlet, the place of our marriage; but, as we were passing out, married, from the door of the house, my heart bounded into my mouth to see Sir Philip Lister walking hardly ten yards away. Yes, he who never left home was there before my eyes in the broad light in St. Arvens street with his oak-stick—walking away from us, indeed, seeming unaware of our presence: yet I have an impression, too, of his head half-turned toward us a moment, of a face ashen with agitation: and my heart, for all its warmth, shivered as with a mortal chill in me.

My reeling feet led me back to Hargen in a kind of dream, a wedded wife, as wild with thoughts as with wine that day, for I was my beloved's, and he was mine: and in what way I spent that day I could not say, since I was new in heaven, and can but remember my fruitless efforts to hide from Esmé's eyes the state of my mind: for she had lately risen from her ailment, and I made a pretence of study with her, and I was severe with my dear, denying him my presence until the evening; and even then retired betimes, leaving him sighing.

My chamber-door I barricaded with a chair—a bridal childishness, since, to secure the room, I should have locked it. And I lay awake for a long hour, looking at the luminosity of the full moon, until, wearied out by the reel of my day's dream, I fell into a brief sleep.

From this a roar awoke me: and may a sound like that sound never more come to me to summon me with its trump. I understood that some soul was in extremis, and out of the deeps of grief and horror was horridly appealing to his God; and, finding myself on the ground, I knelt one wild second, crying aloud: "Almighty God, guard my love from harm in this house of horror." A moment more I had thrown a gown round me, and was gone out of the door.

As I ran along the corridor, trying to strike a light to the candle that I carried, there seemed to reach my ear from somewhere a chuckle very hushed and low, like the jackal chattering over its carrion; and my fingers were so shaken by this thing, that they failed to bring the match into relation with the candle's wick. When the heat reached my hand I dashed down the match. Still running, I lit another—or half lit it: for in the instant when the match fused at the scratch, saw—or in some manner knew—that some mad and monstrous animal was with me; at the same moment the match went out, or was puffed out; and a thing most chilly cold touched my skin. I felt pain then, the pain of the awe of the darkness; and I stood palsied. But within some seconds, I think, I was rushing afresh toward the corridor-end, without the candlestick now, which had dropped from me; so that I could not see that the portal at the end, which I expected to be open as usual, was shut; and I rushed with a shock upon it. It was not only shut, but locked!—finding which, I, standing there, piled the passion of my whole soul into cry on cry, crying "Huggins! Sir Philip! Davenport! Huggins!" then I stood, hearing the streams murmuring as through eternity in the silence of the night, and the strong knocking of my heart against my side—but no reply to my calls.

This was not very astonishing, as my room was in such a solitary part of the mansion: and I stood imprisoned, suffering, expecting every second the coming upon me of that which would strike me dead with fright. The stillness lasted half a minute, perhaps, and then I became aware of a sound outside the door, a bumping going down the stairs in a regular way, like something massive being dragged down, with bump, bump, bump: and such was the solemnity and mystery of this thing to me in my solitude there in that gruesome gloom, that to linger any longer there in my pain soon grew to be impossible to me; and before I knew what I was doing I was out of a window, moving along a ledge fifty feet aloft toward the next window. The ledge was scarcely more than a foot wide, I think, and how I dared it, and why I did not fall, I can't now say. With my nose close to the wall—conscious all the time of drizzle tossed by high winds, conscious of the night full of a wild light, though the moon was quite hidden—I stepped flutteringly along over thin snow in dizzy suspense, keeping my sob until I should reach the next window: and there, as I leapt, I gave it vent, and fainted at my safety. I did not cease to hear, though, the bumping sound going down; and when it got to the bottom, something in me gave me the dauntlessness of heart to go after it.

Down I crept, haltingly, crouching, stair by stair. Halfway down I seemed to hear something being dragged over the floor below. I went on down. The sound had now gone out through a doorway, and I knew which doorway; but as I followed that way, my bare toes struck upon something cold, and I dropped upon my hands over it. I moaned then for pity of myself, because it was dark, and because I did so suffer. But I was conscious, as I dropped, of a rattle of matches, for I still had the match-box in my hand, without knowing that I had it: and the desire took me to strike a light. It was some time, though, before I would, or could, and when I eventually

The Pale Ape

ventured, I saw the sight of the body of the old butler in his night-attire lying wildly before me on the floor: and I knew by a look that was in his eyes that they were for ever sightless.

At the same moment I was aware of the slamming of a door some way off; and again I knew which door—the little side-portal by the kitchen-entrance, leading out northward into the park— and again something gave vigour to my knees, and lifted my feet, to go to see. I made my way to the little portal; opened it slowly; my soles were out on the snow. And before me on the short gravel-path going north into the park I distinctly saw the pale ape, bearing a body against his breast. A moment later he laid down his heavy load, and bent over it; and when I saw him horribly muttering over it, something in me stooped, took up a stone, and threw it at the brute.

It went straight to his head.

After some seconds the creature raised himself slowly, and raced with reeling feet into the darkness of the park.

I staggered then to the body, and saw that it was Huggins Lister strangled; and on the body of my beloved my senses left me.

It was ten in the day before I knew anything more; and then I lay on a bed, on one side of it Esmé, on the other side Mrs. Wiseman.

The latter had a fixed stare; and from the manner in which Esmé was smiling, with her face held sideward, while she persistently counted on her fingers, I could make out that the child was now insane.

I lay still, I said nothing; little I cared.

Presently a girl named Bertha entered to murmur the words: "He isn't found yet"; and from some words murmured in reply by Mrs. Wiseman, I gathered that Sir Philip Lister had disappeared.

Little I cared, I lay still and sullen, with closed lids.

Near noon again came the news that the men seeking for Sir Philip Lister could even yet discover no trace of him; but at about live in the evening he was found dying in the hollow of the rock that lies behind the cascade that they call "The Ape," and was brought to the Hall.

Very soon afterwards Mrs. Wiseman, who had then left my side, flew in again to me with crying eyes, imploring me to try and go for a moment to the dying man, who was hungering to have one sight of me; and I let her throw some clothes over me, and was led by her to the death-bed.

By this time I knew—for Mrs. Wiseman during the day had revealed it to me in a flood of tears—that Sir Philip Lister's mother had too much listened to the chuckling cascade, and so had borne him the being he was—a being capable at any agitation of shedding his human nature to resume the nature of the brute, and hurling away human raiment with his human nature in the murderous turbulence of his nocturnal revels—he who in my eyes had been so perfect in gentleness, so shy, so staid! But none the less I shuddered to the soul when he touched my hand to pant at me through the death-ruckle rolling in his throat: "I have loved you well"—a shudder which perhaps saved me from death or from madness, for I had lapsed that day into a mad apathy. It was nearly night then, and the light in there was very dreary; but I could still see that the hair which overgrew the ogre's frame was considerably more than an inch deep—greenish, and gross as the gorilla's. It clasped him round the throat and round the wrists in lines perfectly defined, like a perfect coat of fur that he wore; and it did not thin, but continued no less thick where it abruptly ended than everywhere else.

But he had "loved me well," and I him now—for if he had been perniciously jealous, it was for love of me that he had been jealous; and in dying he looked into my eyes with human eyes, kindly, mildly, looking "I have loved you well"; and when with his last strength he pointed to where the pebble I had flung had sunk into his skull, then I lifted my voice and wept to God because of him, and myself, and Hargen Hall and all, not caring any longer if my face was buried in the horror of his hairy breast. And so he died, and Huggins Lister, and I was left alive.