The Stone of the Edmundsbury Monks

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"Russia," said Prince Zaleski to me one day, when I happened to be on a visit to him in his darksome sanctuary—"Russia may lie regarded as land surrounded by ocean; that is to say, she is an island. In the same way, it is sheer gross irrelevancy to speak of Britain as an island, unless indeed the word be understood as a mere modus loquendi arising out of a rather poor geographical pleasantry. Britain, in reality, is a small continent. Near her—a little to the south−east—

is situated the large island of Europe. Thus, the enlightened French traveller passing to these shores should commune within himself: 'I now cross to the Mainland'; and retracing his steps: 'I now return to the fragment rent by wrack and earthshock from the Mother−country.' And this I say not in the way of paradox, but as the expression of a sober truth. I have in my mind merely the relative depth and extent—the non−insularity, in fact—of the impressions made by time several nations on the world. But this island of Europe has herself an island of her own: the name of it, Russia. She, of all lands, is the terra incognita, the unknown land; till quite lately she was more—she was the undiscovered, the unsuspected land. She has a literature, you know, and a history, and a language, and a purpose—but of all this the world has hardly so much as heard.

Indeed, she, and not any Antarctic Sea whatever, is the real Ultima Thule of modern times, the true Island of Mystery."

I reproduce these remarks of Zaleski here, not so much on account of the splendid tribute to my country contained in them, as because it ever seemed to me—and especially in connection with the incident I am about to recall—that in this respect at least he was a genuine son of Russia; if she is the Land, so truly was he the Man, of Mystery. I who knew him best alone knew that it was impossible to know him. He was a being little of the present: with one arm he embraced the whole past; the fingers of the other heaved on the vibrant pulse of the future. He seemed to me—

I say it deliberately and with forethought—to possess the unparalleled power not merely of dis−entangling in retrospect, but of unravelling in prospect, and I have known him to relate coming events with unimaginable minuteness of precision. He was nothing if not superlative: his diatribes, now culminating in a very extravaganza of hyperbole—now sailing with loose wing through the downy, witched, Dutch cloud−heaps of some quaintest tramontane Nephelococcugia of thought—now laying down law of the Medes for the actual world of to−day—had oft−times the strange effect of bringing back to my mind the very singular old−epic epithet, w Þíå µ üåí —

airy—as applied to human thought. The mere grip of his memory was not simply extraordinary, it had in it a token, a hint, of the strange, the pythic—nay, the sibylline. And as his reflecting intellect, moreover, had all the lightness of foot of a chamois kid, unless you could contrive to follow each dazzlingly swift successive step, by the sum of which he attained his Alp−heights, he inevitably left on you the astounding, the confounding impression of mental omnipresence.

I had brought with me a certain document, a massive book bound in iron and leather, the diary of one Sir Jocelin Saul. This I had abstracted from a gentleman of my acquaintance, the head of a firm of inquiry agents in London, into whose hand, only the day before, it had come. A distant neighbour of Sir Jocelin, hearing by chance of his extremity, had invoked the assistance of this firm; but the aged baronet, being in a state of the utmost feebleness, terror, and indeed hysterical incoherence, had been able to utter no word in explanation of his condition or wishes, and, in silent abandonment, had merely handed the book to the agent.

A day or two after I had reached the desolate old mansion which the prince occupied, knowing that he might

sometimes lie induced to take an absorbing interest in questions that had proved themselves too profound, or too intricate, for ordinary solution, I asked him if he was willing to hear the details read out from the diary, and on his assenting, I proceeded to do so.

The brief narrative had reference to a very large and very valuable oval gem enclosed in the substance of a golden chalice, which chalice, in the monastery of St. Edmundsbury, had once lain centuries long within the Loculus, or inmost coffin, wherein reposed the body of St.

Edmund. By pressing a hidden pivot, the cup (which was composed of two equal parts, connected by minute hinges) sprang open, and in a hollow space at the bottom was disclosed the gem. Sir Jocelin Saul, I may say, was lineally connected with—though, of course, not descendant from—that same Jocelin of Brakelonda, a brother of the Edmundsbury convent, who wrote the now so celebrated Jocelini Chronica: and the chalice had fallen into the possession of time family, seemingly at some time prior to the suppression of the monastery about 1537. On it was inscribed in old English characters of unknown date the words:

"Shulde this Ston stalen bee,
Or shuld it chaunges dre,
The Houss of Sawl and hys lied anoon shal de."

The stone itself was an intaglio, and had engraved on its surface the figure of a mythological animal, together with some nearly obliterated letters, of which the only ones remaining legible were those forming the word "Has." As a sure precaution against the loss of the gem, another cup had been made and engraved in an exactly similar manner, inside of which, to complete time delusion, another stone of the same size and cut, but of comparatively valueless material, had been placed.

Sir Jocelin Saul, a man of intense nervosity, lived his life alone in a remote old manor−house in Suffolk, his only companion being a person of Eastern origin, named Ul−Jabal. The baronet had consumed his vitality in time life−long attempt to sound the too fervid Maelstrom of Oriental research, and his mind had perhaps caught from his studies a tinge of their morbidness, their esotericism, their insanity. He had for some years past been engaged in the task of writing a stupendous work on Pre−Zoroastrian Theogonies, in which, it is to be supposed, Ul−Jabal acted somewhat in the capacity of secretary. But I will give verbatim the extracts from his diary:

"June 11.—This is my birthday. Seventy years ago exactly I slid from the belly of the great Dark into this Light and Life. My God! My God! it is briefer than the range of an hour, fleeter than a mid−day trance. Ul−Jabal greeted me warmly—seemed to have been looking forward to it—and pointed out that seventy is of the fateful numbers, its only factors being seven, five, and two: the last denoting the duality of Birth and Death; five, Isolation; seven, Infinity. I informed him that this was also my father's birthday; and his father's; and repeated the oft−told tale of how the latter, just seventy years ago to−day, walking at twilight by the churchyard−wall, saw the figure of himself sitting on a grave−stone, and died five weeks later riving with the pangs of hell.

Whereat the sceptic showed his two huge rows of teeth.

"What is his peculiar interest in the Edmundsbury chalice? On each successive birthday when the cup has been produced, he has asked me to show him the stone. Without any well−defined reason I have always declined, but to−day I yielded. He gazed long into its sky−blue depth, and then asked if I had no idea what the inscription 'Has' meant. I informed him that it was one of the lost secrets of the world.

"June 15.—Some new element has entered into our existence here. Something threatens me. I hear the echo of a menace against my sanity and my life. It is as if the garment which enwraps me has grown too hot, too heavy for me. A notable drowsiness has settled on my brain—a drowsiness in which thought, though slow, is a thousandfold more fiery−vivid than ever. Oh, fair goddess of Reason, desert not me, thy chosen child!

June 18.—Ul−Jabal?—that man is the very Devil incarnate!

June 19.—So much for my bounty, all my munificence, to this poisonous worm. I picked him up on the heights of the Mountain of Lebanon, a cultured savage among cultured savages, and brought him here to be a prince of thought by my side. What though his plundered wealth—the debt I owe him—has saved me from a sort of ruin? Have not I instructed him in the sweet secret of Reason?

"I lay back on my bed in the lonely morning watches, my soul heavy as with the distilled essence of opiates, and in vivid vision knew that he had entered my apartment. In the twilight gloom his glittering rows of shark's teeth seemed impacted on my eyeball—I saw them, and nothing else. I was not aware when he vanished from the

room. But at daybreak I crawled on hands and knees to the cabinet containing the chalice. The viperous murderer! He has stolen my gem, well knowing that with it he has stolen my life. The stone is gone—gone, my precious gem.

A weakness overtook me, and I lay for many dreamless hours naked on the marble floor.

"Does the fool think to hide ought from my eyes? Can he imagine that I shall not recover my precious gem, my stone of Saul?

June 20.—Ah, Ul−Jabal—my brave, my noble Son of the Prophet of God! He has replaced the stone! He would not slay an aged man. The yellow ray of his eye, it is but the gleam of the great thinker, not—not—the gleam of the assassin. Again, as I lay in semi−somnolence, I saw him enter my room, this time more distinctly. He went up to the cabinet. Shaking the chalice in the dawning, some hours after he had left, I heard with delight the rattle of the stone. I might have known he would replace it; I should not have doubted his clemency to a poor man like me. But the strange being!—he has taken the other Stone from the other cup—a thing of little value to any man! Is Ul−Jabal mad or I?

"June 21.—Merciful Lord in Heaven! he has not replaced it—not it—but another instead of it.

To−day I actually opened the chalice, and saw. He has put a stone there, the same in size, in cut, in engraving, but different in colour, in quality, in value—a stone I have never seen before. How has he obtained it— whence? I must brace myself to probe, to watch; I must turn myself into an eye to search this devil's−bosom. My life, this subtle, cunning Reason of mine, hangs in the balance.

"June 22.—Just now he offered me a cup of wine. I almost dashed it to the ground before him.

But he looked steadfastly into my eye. I flinched: and drank—drank.

"Years ago, when, as I remember, we were at Balbec, I saw him one day make an almost tasteless preparation out of pure black nicotine, which in mere wanton lust he afterwards gave to some of the dwellers by the Caspian to drink. But the fiend would surely never dream of giving to me that browse of hell—to me an aged man, and a thinker, a seer.

June 23.—The mysterious, the unfathomable Ul−Jabal! Once again, as I lay in heavy trance at midnight, has he invaded, calm and noiseless as a spirit, the sanctity of my chamber. Serene on the swaying air, which, radiant with soft beams of vermil and violet light, rocked me into variant visions of heaven, I reclined and regarded him unmoved. The man has replaced the valueless stone in the modern−made chalice, and has now stolen the false stone from the other, which he himself put there! In patience will I possess this my soul, and watch what shall betide. My eyes shall know no slumber!

"June 24.—No more—no more shall I drink wine from the hand of Ul−Jabal. My knees totter beneath the weight of my lean body. Daggers of lambent fever race through my brain incessant.

Some fibrillary twitchings at the right angle of the mouth have also arrested my attention.

"June 25.—He has dared at open mid−day to enter my room. I watched him from an angle of the stairs pass along the corridor and open my door. But for the terrifying, death−boding thump, thump of my heart, I should have faced the traitor then, and told him that I knew all his treachery. Did I say that I had strange fibrillary twitchings at the right angle of my mouth, and a brain on fire? I have ceased to write my book—the more the pity for the world, not for me.

"June 26.—Marvellous to tell, the traitor, Ul−Jabal, has now placed another stone in the Edmundsbury chalice—also identical in nearly every respect with the original gem. This, then, was the object of his entry into my room yesterday. So that he has first stolen the real stone and replaced it by another; then he has stolen this other and replaced it by yet another; he has beside stolen the valueless stone from the modern chalice, and then replaced it. Surely a man gone rabid, a man gone dancing, foaming, raving mad!

"June 28.—I have now set myself to the task of recovering my jewel. It is here, and I shall find it. Life against life—and which is the best life, mine or this accursed Ishmaehite's? If need be, I will do murder—I, with this withered hand—so that I get back the heritage which is mine.

"To−day, when I thought he was wandering in the park, I stole into his room, locking the door on the inside. I trembled exceedingly, knowing that his eyes are in every place. I ransacked the chamber, dived among his clothes, but found no stone. One singular thing in a drawer I saw: a long, white beard, and a wig of long and snow−white hair. As I passed out of the chamber, lo, he stood face to face with me at the door in the passage. My heart gave one bound, and then seemed wholly to cease its travail. Oh, I must be sick unto death, weaker than a

bruised reed! When I woke from my swoon he was supporting me in his arms. 'Now,' he said, grinning down at me, 'now you have at last delivered all into my hands.' He left me, and I saw him go into his room and lock the door upon himself. What is it I have delivered into the madman's hands?

"July 1.—Life against life—and his, the young, the stalwart, rather than mine, the mouldering, the sere. I love life. Not yet am I ready to weigh anchor, and reeve halliard, and turn my prow over the watery paths of the wine−brown Deeps. Oh no. Not yet. Let him die. Many and many are the days in which I shall yet see the light, walk, think. I am averse to end the number of my years: there is even a feeling in me at times that this worn body shall never, never taste of death.

The chalice predicts indeed that I and my house shall end when the stone is lost—a mere fiction at first, an idler's dream then, but now—now—that the prophecy has stood so long a part of the reality of things, and a fact among facts—no longer fiction, but Adamant, stern as the very word of God. Do I not feel hourly since it has gone how the surges of life ebb, ebb ever lower in my heart? Nay, nay, hut there is hope. I have here beside me an Arab blade of subtle Damascene steel, insinuous to pierce and to hew, with which in a street of Bethlehem I saw a Syrian's head cleft open—a gallant stroke! The edges of this I have made bright and white for a nuptial of blood.

"July 2.—I spent the whole of the last night in searching every nook and crack of the house, using a powerful magnifying lens. At times I thought U1−Jabal was watching me, and would pounce out and murder me. Convulsive tremors shook my frame like earthquake. Ah me, I fear I am all too frail for this work. Yet dear is the love of life.

"July 7.—The last days I have passed in carefully searching the grounds, with the lens as before. Ul−Jabal constantly found pretexts for following me, and I am confident that every step I took was known to him. No sign anywhere of the grass having been disturbed. Yet my lands are wide, and I cannot be sure. The burden of this mighty task is greater than I can bear. I am weaker than a bruised reed. Shall I not slay my enemy, and make an end?

"July 8.—Ul−Jabal has been in my chamber again! I watched him through a crack in the panelling. His form was hidden by the bed, but I could see his hand reflected in the great mirror opposite the door. First, I cannot guess why, he moved to a point in front of the mirror the chair in which I sometimes sit. He then went to the box in which lie my few garments—and opened it.

Ah, I have the stone—safe—safe! He fears my cunning, ancient eyes, and has hidden it in the one place where I would be least likely to seek it—in my own trunk! And yet I dread, most intensely I dread, to look.

"July 9.—The stone, alas, is not there! At the last moment he must have changed his purpose.

Could his wondrous sensitiveness of intuition have made him feel that my eyes were looking in on him?

"July 10.—In the dead of night I knew that a stealthy foot had gone past my door. I rose and threw a mantle round me; I put on my head my cap of fur; I took the tempered blade in my hands; then crept out into time dark, and followed. Ul−Jabal carried a small lantern which revealed him to me. My feet were bare, but he wore felted slippers, which to my unfailing ear were not utterly noiseless. He descended the stairs to the bottom of time house, while I crouched behind him in the deepest gloom of the corners and walls. At the bottom he walked into the pantry: there stopped, and turned the lantern full in the direction of the spot where I stood; but so agilely did I slide behind a pillar, that he could not have seen me. In the pantry he lifted the trap−door, and descended still further into the vaults beneath the house. Ah, the vaults—time long, the tortuous, the darksome vaults—how had I forgotten them? Still I followed, rent by seismic shocks of terror. I had not forgotten the weapon: could I creep near enough, I felt that I might plunge it into the marrow of his back. He opened the iron door of the first vault and passed in. If I could lock him in?—but he held the key. On and on he wound his way, holding the lantern near the ground, his head bent down. The thought came to me then, that, had I but the courage, one swift sweep, and all were over. I crept closer, closer. Suddenly he turned round, and made a quick step in my direction. I saw his eyes, the murderous grin of his jaw. I know not if he saw me—thought forsook me. The weapon fell with clatter and clangor from my grasp, and in panic fright I fled with extended arms and the headlong swiftness of a stripling, through the black labyrinths of the caverns, through the vacant corridors of the house, till I reached my chamber, the door of which I had time to fasten on myself before I dropped, gasping, panting for very life, on the floor.

"July 11.—I had not the courage to see U1−Jabai to−day. I have remained locked in my chamber all the time without food or water. My tongue cleaves to the roof of my mouth.

"July 12.—I took heart and crept downstairs. I met him in the study. He smiled on me, and I on him, as if nothing had happened between us. Oh, our old friendship, bow it has turned into bitterest hate! I had taken the false stone from the Edmundsbury chalice and put it in the pocket of my brown gown, with the bold intention of showing it to him, and asking him if he knew aught of it. But when I faced him, my courage failed again. We drank together and ate together as in the old days of love.

"July 13.— I cannot think that I have not again imbibed some soporiferous drug. A great heaviness of sleep weighed on my brain till late in the day. When I woke my thoughts were in wild distraction, and a most peculiar condition of my skin held me fixed before the mirror. It is dry as parchment, and brown as the leaves of autumn.

"July 14.—Ul−Jabal is gone! And I am left a lonely, a desolate old man! He said, though I swore it was false, that I had grown to mistrust him! that I was hiding something from him! that he could live with me no more! No more, he said, should I see his face! The debt I owe him he would forgive, he has taken one small parcel with him—and is gone!

"July 15.—Gone! gone! In mazeful dream I wander with uncovered head far and wide over my domain, seeking I know not what. The stone he has with him—the precious stone of Saul. I feel the life−surge ebbing, ebbing in my heart."

Here the manuscript abruptly ended.

Prince Zaleski had listened as I read aloud, lying back on his Moorish couch and breathing slowly from his lips a heavy reddish vapour, which he imbibed from a very small, carved, bismuth pipette. His face, as far as I could see in the green−grey crepuscular atmosphere of the apartment, was expressionless. But when I had finished he turned fully round on me, and said:

"You perceive, I hope, the sinister meaning of all this?"

"Has it a meaning?"

Zaleski smiled.

"Can you doubt it? in the shape of a cloud, the pitch of a thrush's note, the nuance of a sea−shell you would find, had you only insight enough, inductive and deductive cunning enough, not only a meaning, but, I am convinced, a quite endless significance. Undoubtedly, in a human document of this kind, there is a meaning; and I may say at once that this meaning is entirely transparent to me. Pity only that you did not read the diary to me before."

"Why?"

"Because we might, between us, have prevented a crime, and saved a life. The last entry in time diary was made on the 15th of July. What day is this?"

"This is the 20th."

"Then I would wager a thousand to one that we are too late. There is still, however, the one chance left. The time is now seven o'clock: seven of the evening, I think, not of time morning; the houses of business in London are therefore closed. But why not send my man, Ham, with a letter by train to the private address of the person from whom you obtained the diary, telling him to hasten immediately to Sir Jocelin Saul, and on no consideration to leave his side for a moment? Ham would reach this person before midnight, and understanding that the matter was one of life and death, he would assuredly do your bidding."

As I was writing the note suggested by Zaleski, I turned and asked him:

"From whom shall I say that the danger is to be expected—from the Indian?"

"From Ul−Jabal, yes; but by no means Indian—Persian."

Profoundly impressed by this knowledge of detail derived from sources which had brought me no intelligence, I handed the note to the negro, telling him how to proceed, and instructing him before starting from the station to search all the procurable papers of the last few days, and to return in case he found in any of them a notice of the death of Sir Jocelin Saul. Then I resumed my seat by time side of Zaleski.

"As I have told you," he said, "I am fully convinced that our messenger has gone on a bootless errand. I believe you will find that what has really occurred is this: either yesterday, or the day before, Sir Jocelin was found by his servant—I imagine he had a servant, though no mention is made of any—lying on the marble floor of his chamber, dead. Near him, probably by his side, will be found a gem—an oval stone, white in colour—the same in fact which Ul−Jabal last placed in the Edmundsbury chalice. There will be no marks of violence—no trace of poison— the death will be found to be a perfectly natural one. Yet, in this case, a particularly wicked

murder has been committed. There are, I assure you, to my positive knowledge forty−three—and in one island in the South Seas, forty−four—different methods of doing murder, any one of which would be entirely beyond the scope of the introspective agencies at the ordinary disposal of society.

"But let us bend our minds to time details of this matter. Let us ask first, who is this Ul−Jabal? I have said that he is a Persian, and of this there is abundant evidence in the narrative other than his mere name. Fragmentary as the document is, and not intended by time writer to afford time information, there is yet evidence of the religion of this man, of the particular sect of that religion to which lie belonged, of his peculiar shade of colour, of the object of his stay at time manor−house of Saul, of the special tribe amongst whom he formerly lived. 'What,' he asks, when his greedy eyes first light on the long−desired gem, 'what is the meaning of the inscription "Has" '—

the meaning which he so well knew. 'One of the lost secrets of the world,' replies the baronet.

But I can hardly understand a learned Orientalist speaking in that way about what appears to me a very patent circumstance: it is clear that he never earnestly applied himself to the solution of the riddle, or else—what is more likely, in spite of his rather high−flown estimate of his own 'Reason'—that his mind, and the mind of his ancestors, never was able to go farther back in the than the Edmundsbury Monks. But they did not make the stone, nor did they dig it from the depths of the earth in Suffolk—they got it from someone, and it is not difficult to say with certainty from whom. The stone, then, might have been engraved by that someone, or by the someone from whom he received it, and so on back into the dimnesscs of time. And consider the character of the engraving—it consists of a mythological animal, and some words, of which the letters 'Has' only are distinguishable. But the animal, at least, is pure Persian. The Persians, you know, were not only quite worthy competitors with the Hebrews, the Egyptians, and later on the Greeks, for excellence in the glyptic art, but this fact is remarkable, that in much the same way that the figure of the scarabæus on an intaglio or cameo is a pretty infallible indication of an Egyptian hand, so is that of a priest or a grotesque animal a sure indication of a Persian. We may say, then, from that evidence alone—though there is more—that this gem was certainly Persian.

And having reached that point, the mystery of 'Has' vanishes: for we at once jump at the conclusion that that too is Persian. But Persian, you say, written in English characters? Yes, and it was precisely this fact that made its meaning one of what the baronet childishly calls 'the lost secrets of the world': for every successive inquirer, believing it part of an English phrase, was thins hopelessly led astray in his investigation. 'Has' is, in fact, part of the word 'Hasn−us−Sabah, ' and the mere circumstance that some of it has been obliterated, while the figure of the mystic animal remains intact, shows that it was executed by one of a nation less skilled in the art of graving in precious stones than the Persians—by a rude, mediæval Englishman, in short—the modern revival of the art owing its origin, of course, to the Medici of a later age. And of this Englishman—who either graved the stone himself or got someone else to do it for him—do we know nothing? We know, at least, that he was certainly a fighter, probably a Norman baron, that on his arm he bore the cross of red, that he trod the sacred soil of Palestine. Perhaps, to prove this, I need hardly remind you who Hasn−us−Sabah was. It is enough if I say that he was greatly mixed up in the affairs of the Crusaders, lending his irresistible arms now to this side, now to that. He was the chief of the heterodox Mohammedan sect of the Assassins (this word, I believe, is actually derived from his name); imagined himself to be an incarnation of the Deity, and from his inaccessible rock−fortress of Alamut in the Elburz exercised a sinister influence on the intricate politics of the day. The Red Cross Knights called him Shaikh−ul−Jabal—the Old Man of the Mountains, that very nickname connecting him infallibly with the Ul−Jabal of our own times.

Now three well−known facts occur to me in connection with this stone of the House of Saul: the first, that Saladin met in battle, and defeated, and plundered, in a certain place, on a certain day, this Hasn−us−Sabah, or one of his successors bearing the same name; the second, that about this the there was a cordial rapprochement between Saladin and Richard the Lion, and between the Infidels and the Christians generally, during which a free interchange of gems, then regarded as of deep mystic importance, took place—remember 'The Talisman,' and the 'Lee Penny'; the third, that soon after the fighters of Richard, and then himself returned to England, the Loculus or coffin of St. Edmund (as we are informed by the Jocelini Chronica) was opened by the Abbot at midnight, and the body of the martyr exposed. On such occasions it was customary to place gems and relics in the coffin, when it was again closed up. Now, the chalice with the stone was taken from this loculus; and is it possible not to believe that some knight, to whom it had been presented by one of Saladin's men, had in turn presented it to the monastery, first scratching un−couthly on its surface the name of Hasn to mark its semi−sacred origin, or perhaps

bidding the monks to do so? But the Assassins, now called, I think, 'al Hasani' or 'Ismaili'—'that accursed Ishmaelite,' the baronet exclaims in one place—still live, are still a flourishing sect impelled by fervid religious fanaticisms. And where think you is their chief place of settlement? Where, but on the heights of that same 'Lebanon' on which Sir Jocelin 'picked up' his too doubtful scribe and literary helper?

"It now becomes evident that Ul−Jabal was one of the sect of the Assassins, and that the object of his sojourn at the manor−house, of his financial help to the baronet, of his whole journey perhaps to England, was the recovery of the sacred gem which once glittered on the breast of the founder of his sect. In dread of spoiling all by over−rashness, he waits, perhaps for years, till he makes sure that the stone is the right one by seeing it with his own eyes, and learns the secret of the spring by which the chalice is opened. He then proceeds to steal it. So far all is clear enough.

Now, this too is conceivable, that, intending to commit the theft, he had beforehand provided himself with another stone similar in size and shape—these being well known to him—to the other, in order to substitute it for the real stone, and so, for a the at least, escape detection. It is presumable that the chalice was not often opened by the baronet, and this would therefore have been a perfectly rational device on the part of Ul−Jabal. But assuming this to be his mode of thinking, how ludicrously absurd appears all the trouble he took to engrave the false stone in an exactly similar manner to the other. That could not help him in producing the deception, for that he did not contemplate the stone being seen, but only heard in the cup, is proved by the fact that he selected a stone of a different colour. This colour, as I shall afterwards show you, was that of a pale, brown−spotted stone. But we are met with something more extraordinary still when we come to the last stone, the white one—I shall prove that it was white—which Ul−Jabal placed in the cup. Is it possible that he had provided two substitutes, and that he had engraved these two, without object, in the same minutely careful manner? Your mind refuses to conceive it; and having done this, declines, in addition, to believe that he had prepared even one substitute; and I am fully in accord with you in this conclusion.

"We may say then that Ul−Jabal had not prepared any substitute; and it may he added that it was a thing altogether beyond the limits of the probable that he could by chance have possessed two old gems exactly similar in every detail down to the very half−obliterated letters of the word 'Hasn−us−Sabah.' I have now shown, you perceive, that he did not make them purposely, and that he did not possess them accidentally. Nor were they the baronet's, for we have his declaration that he had never seen them before. Whence then did the Persian obtain them? That point will immediately emerge into clearness, when we have sounded his motive for replacing the one false stone by the other, and, above all, for taking away the valueless stone, and then replacing it. And in order to lead you up to the comprehension of this motive, I begin by making the bold assertion that Ul−Jabal had not in his possession the real St. Edmundsbury stone at all.

"You are surprised; for you argue that if we are to take the baronet's evidence at all, we must take it in this particular also, and he positively asserts that he saw the Persian take the stone. It is true that there are indubitable signs of insanity in the document, but it is the insanity of a diseased mind manifesting itself by fantastic exaggeration of sentiment, rather than of a mind confiding to itself its own delusions as to matters of fact. There is therefore nothing so certain as that Ul−Jabal did steal the gem; but these two things are equally evident: that by some means or other it very soon passed out of his possession, and that when it had so passed, he, for his part, believed it to be in the possession of the baronet. 'Now,' he cries in triumph, one day as he catches Sir Jocelin in his room—'now you have delivered all into my hands.' 'All,' what, Sir Jocelin wonders. 'All,' of course, meant the stone. He believes that the baronet has done precisely what the baronet afterwards believes that he has done—hidden away the stone in the most secret of all places, in his own apartment, to wit. The Persian, sure now at last of victory, accordingly hastens into his chamber, and 'locks the door,' in order, by an easy search, to secure his prize. When, moreover, the baronet is examining the house at night with his lens, he believes that Ul−Jabal is spying his movements; when he extends his operations to the park, the other finds pretexts to he near him. Ul−Jabal dogs his footsteps like a shadow. But supposing he had really had the jewel, and had deposited it in a place of perfect safety—such as, with or without lenses, the extensive grounds of the manor−house would certainly have afforded—his more reasonable rôle would have been that of unconscious nonchalance, rather than of agonised interest. But, in fact, he supposed the owner of the stone to be himself seeking a secure hiding−place for it, and is resolved at all costs on knowing the secret. And again in the vaults beneath the house Sir Jocelin reports that Ul−Jabal 'holds the lantern near the ground, with his head bent down': can anything be better

descriptive of the attitude of search? Yet each is so sure that the other possesses the gem, that neither is able to suspect that both are seekers.

"But, after all, there is far better evidence of the non−possession of the stone by the Persian than all this—and that is the murder of the baronet, for I can almost promise you that our messenger will return in a few minutes. Now, it seems to me that Ul−Jabal was not really murderous, averse rather to murder; thus the baronet is often in his power, swoons in his arms, lies under the influence of narcotics in semi−sleep while the Persian is in his room, and yet no injury is done him. Still, when the clear necessity to murder—the clear means of gaining the stone—presents itself to Ul−Jabal, he does not hesitate a moment— indeed, he has already made elaborate preparations for that very necessity. And when was it that this necessity presented itself? It was when the baronet put the false stone in the pocket of a loose gown for the purpose of confronting the Persian with it. But what kind of pocket? I think you will agree with me, that male garments, admitting of the designation 'gown,' have. usually only outer pocketslarge, square pockets, simply sewed on to the outside of the robe. But a stone of that size must have made such a pocket bulge outwards. Ul−Jabal must have noticed it. Never before has he been perfectly sure that the baronet carried the long−desired gem about on his body; but now at last he knows beyond all doubt. To obtain it, there are several courses open to him: he may rush there and then on the weak old man and tear the stone from him; he may ply him with narcotics, and extract it from the pocket during sleep. But in these there is a small chance of failure; there is a certainty of near or ultimate detection, pursuit—and this is a land of Law, swift and fairly sure.

No, the old man must die: only thus—thus surely, and thus secretly—can the outraged dignity of Hasn−us−Sabah be appeased. On the very next day he leaves the house—no more shall the mistrustful baronet, who is 'hiding something from him,' see his face. He carries with him a small parcel. Let me tell you what was in that parcel: it contained the baronet's fur cap, one of his 'brown gowns,' and a snow−white beard and wig. Of the cap we can be sure; for from the fact that, on leaving his room at midnight to follow the Persian through the house, he put it on his head, I gather that he wore it habitually during all his waking hours; yet after Ul−Jabal has left him he wanders far and wide 'with uncovered head.' Can you not picture the distracted old man seeking ever and anon with absent mind for his long−accustomcd head−gear, and seeking in vain?

Of the gown, too, we may be equally certain: for it was the procuring of this that led Ul−Jabal to the baronet's trunk; we now know that he did not go there to hide the stone, for he had it not to hide; nor to seek it, for he would be unable to believe the baronet childish enough to deposit it in so obvious a place. As for the wig and beard, they had been previously seen in his room. But before he leaves the house Ul−Jabal has one more work to do: once more the two eat and drink together as in 'the old days of love'; once more the baronet is drunken with a deep sleep, and when he wakes, his skin is 'brown as the leaves of autumn.' That is the evidence of which I spake in the beginning as giving us a hint of the exact shade of the Oriental's colour—it was the yellowish−brown of a sered leaf. And now that the face of the baronet has been smeared with this indelible pigment, all is ready for the tragedy, and Ul−Jabal departs. He will return, but not immediately, for he will at least give the eyes of his victim time to grow accustomed to the change of colour in his face; nor will be tarry long, for there is no telling whether, or whither, the stone may not disappear from that outer pocket. I therefore surmise that the tragedy took place a day or two ago. I remembered the feebleness of the old man, his highly neurotic condition; I thought of those 'fibrillary twitchings,' indicating the onset of a well−known nervous disorder sure to end in sudden death; I recalled his belief that on account of the loss of the stone, in which he felt his life bound up, the chariot of death was urgent on his footsteps; I bore in mind his memory of his grandfather dying in agony just seventy years ago after seeing his own wraith by the churchyard−wall; I knew that such a man could not be struck by the sudden, the terrific shock of seeing himself sitting in the chair before the mirror (the chair, you remember, had been placed there by Ul−Jabab without dropping down stone dead on the spot. I was thus able to predict the manner and place of the baronet's death—if he be dead. Beside him, I said, would probably be found a white stone. For Ul−Jabal, his ghastly impersonation ended, would hurry to the pocket, snatch out the stone, and finding it not the stone he sought, would in all likelihood dash it down, fly away from the corpse as if from plague, and, I hope, straightway go and— hang himself."

It was at this point that the black mask of Ham framed itself between the python−skin tapestries of the doorway. I tore from him the paper, now two days old, which he held in his hand, and under the heading, "Sudden death of a Baronet," read a nearly exact account of the facts which Zaleski had been detailing to me.

"I can see by your face that I was not altogether at fault," he said, with one of his musical laughs; "but there still remains for us to discover whence Ul−Jabal obtained his two substitutes, his motive for exchanging one for the other, and for stealing the valueless gem; but, above all, we must find where the real stone was all the time that these two men so sedulously sought it, and where it now is. Now, let us turn our attention to this stone, and ask, first, what light does the inscription on the cup throw on its nature? The inscription assures us that if 'this stone be stolen,' or if it 'chaunges dee,' the House of Saul and its head 'anoon' (i e. anon, at once) shall die.

'Dre,' I may remind you, is an old English word, used, I think, by Burns, identical with the Saxon 'dreogan,' meaning to 'suffer.' So that the writer at least contemplated that the stone might 'suffer changes.' But what kind of changes—external or internal? External change—

change of environment—is already provided for when he says, 'shulde this Ston stalen bee'; 'chaunges,' therefore, in his mind, meant internal changes. But is such a thing possible for any precious stone, and for this one in particular? As to that, we might answer when we know the name of this one. It nowhere appears in the manuscript, and yet it is immediately discoverable.

For it was a 'sky−blue' stone; a sky−blue, sacred stone; a sky−blue, sacred, Persian stone. That at once gives us its name—it was a turquoise. But can the turquoise, to the certain knowledge of a mediæval writer, 'chaunges dre'? Let us turn for light to old Anselm de Boot: that is he in pig−skin on the shelf behind the bronze Hera."

I handed the volume to Zaleski. He pointed to a passage which read as follows:

"Assuredly the turquoise doth possess a soul more intelligent than that of man. But we cannot be wholly sure of the presence of Angels in precious stones. I do rather opine that the evil spirit doth take up his abode therein, transforming himself into an angel of light, to the end that we put our trust not in God, but in the precious stone; and thus, perhaps, doth he deceive our spirits by the turquoise: for the turquoise is of two sorts: those which keep their colour, and those which lose it."

"You thus see," resumed Zaleski, "that the turquoise was believed to have the property of changing its colour—a change which was universally supposed to indicate the fading away and death of its owner. The good de Boot, alas, believed this to be a property of too many other stones beside, like the Hebrews in respect of their urimn and thummim; but in the case of the turquoise, at least, it is a well−authenticated natural phenomenon, and I have myself seen such a specimen. In some cases the change is a gradual process; in others it may occur suddenly within an hour, especially when the gem, long kept in the dark, is exposed to brilliant sunshine. I should say, however, that in this metamorphosis there is always an intermediate stage: the stone first changes from blue to a pale colour spotted with brown, and, lastly, to a pure white. Thus, Ul−Jabal having stolen the stone, finds that it is of the wrong colour, and soon after replaces it; he supposes that in the darkness he has selected the wrong chalice, and so takes the valueless stone from the other. This, too, he replaces, and, infinitely puzzled, makes yet another hopeless trial of the Edmundsbury chalice, and, again baffled, again replaces it, concluding now that the baronet has suspected his designs, and substituted a false stone for the real one. But after this last replacement, the stone assumes its final hue of white, and thus the baronet is led to think that two stones have been substituted by Ul−Jabal for his own invaluable gem. All this while the gem was lying serenely in its place in the chalice. And thus it came to pass that in the Manor−house of Saul there arose a somewhat considerable Ado about Nothing."

For a moment Zaleski paused; then, turning round and haying his hand on the hi−own forehead of the mummy by his side, he said:

"My friend here could tell you, an he would, a fine tale of the immensely important part which jewels in all ages have played in human history, human religions, institutions, ideas. He flourished some five centuries before the Messiah, was a Memphian priest of Amsu, and, as the hieroglyphics on his coffin assure me, a prime favourite with one Queen Amyntas. Beneath these mouldering swaddlings of the grave a great ruby still cherishes its blood−guilty secret on the forefinger of his right hand. Most curious is it to reflect how in all lands, and at all times, precious minerals have been endowed by men with mystic virtues. The Persians, for instance, believed that spindle and the garnet were harbingers of joy. Have you read the ancient Bishop of Rennes on the subject? Really, I almost think there must be some truth in all this. The instinct of universal man is rarely far at fault. Already you have a semi−comic 'gold−cure' for alcoholism, and you have heard of the geophagism of certain African tribes. What if the scientist of the future be destined to discover that the diamond, and it alone, is a specific for cholera, that powdered rubellite cures fever, and the chrysoberyl gout? It would be in exact conformity with what I have hitherto observed of a general trend towards a certain inborn perverseness and whimsicality in Nature."

Note.—As some proof of the fineness of intuition evidenced by Zaleski, as distinct from his more conspicuous powers of reasoning, I may here state that some years after the occurrence of the tragedy I have recorded above, the skeleton of a man was discovered in the vaults of the Manor house of Saul. I have not the least doubt that it was the skeleton of Ul−Jabal. The teeth were very prominent. A rotten rope was found loosely knotted round the vertebræ of his neck.