

The Ebony Box.

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THERE was nothing, to the glance of a casual observer, of the extraordinary in Colonel Hicks' drawing-room. Furnished with that absence of discriminating and elective taste which is the recognized indication of a sober position in the County, it was a room in which anything of the centre, anything of essential art or manifest beauty would have struck as false a note as anything of exuberant vulgarity. People who are given to self-expression at all speak as plainly by those accidents of personal temperament, furniture, pictures, books, as by the conventional symbols of thought; and the drawing-room of the Hick's was as insignificant and common-place as their language. Just, however, as a man whose ordinary speech is the fumbled accident of childhood, will at times, with something of the inevitability of chance, break out with a passionately coloured expletive, so the drab monotony of the drawing-room at Fairholt was interrupted, with a suddenness that stung, by the ebony box. The box itself, while beautiful in a fantastic way, was not so remarkable as its apparent effect on the room and the occupants; it seemed, in all circumstances, to be at once both the point of rest and the centre of conflict. In any large gathering of people, which is not merely the disunited clutter of ordinary gossips, the unity of the crowd gains expression in some one central person; a man of great reputation, or of great ability, serves as a lightning-conductor for whatever of capacity there is in the company; he attracts and emanates, elicits and bestows with the incurious potency of the sun. At Fairholt the position thus usually taken by a person, was the inalienable privilege of the ebony box. This was experienced by the most unimaginative of callers, whose feelings in the matter were summed up by Miss Jenkins, whose life was a breathless game of character-making and character-taking, when she circulated Tommy Forbes's mot that "If the devil was not in Colonel Hicks' ebony box he ought to be."

The presumed immanence of the devil may have accounted for Mrs Hicks' sentiments towards the box, sentiments that had that mixture of fascination and repulsion which arrests the reader of mediæval witch-trials, as the most distinct mark of feminine diabolists. Mrs Hicks was one of those women who marry firstly for curiosity, secondly for comfort. Domestic by temperament, she had but an undeveloped sense of the art of housekeeping, that

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elaborate capacity for selection without which domesticity dribbles away in a passion for fidgety alteration. Mrs Hicks would change the position of a chair not because she thought it would be better elsewhere, nor even because she was dissatisfied with its first place, but simply because with her a distrust of permanence was the only sign of the capable housewife. In appearance she was pretty without being attractive, and she dressed herself inevitably in that shade of blue that has an unwholesome affinity for pink. It would not be true to say that she had captured Hicks as a husband; but certainly when he fell into the waters of possible matrimony she held his head under, a fact that Hicks took care she should remember and regret. Hicks himself was one of those rare men whose marriage only caused a surprise to his acquaintances. He was not a sufferer from misogyny, that perverse variety of nympholepsy, but a man who could be cordial to women without committing himself, and might treat a girl very much as he would a favourite retriever. His marriage with a woman of May Buchanan's type was bound to end in some kind of grotesque tragedy.

That Ralph Hicks' treatment of May was deliberate it would not be just to affirm. It sprang naturally, as the flame of a candle from a lighted match, from the contact between the two temperaments; the conflict between the curiosity which a woman calls loving interest and the conceited reserve which is the basis of the masculine idea of honour. Their honeymoon was uneventful enough. A honeymoon is not, as the cheap satirists would have us believe, a time of disillusion; it is not a period in which the lover and the beloved are stripped of singular qualities, the gift of earlier and less intimate affection. It is rather the time in which new delusions, equal in force though different in character, are superadded to the old. Their honeymoon was a time in which two comparative strangers, with no kinship of blood or of association, constructed masks with a facial resemblance to the reality, which they agreed, validly enough, were to be the conventional symbols of Ralph and May. At the end of his two months' trip on the Continent, Ralph Hicks knew his wife by rote, not by heart; and embittered by knowledge he led her down the way of agony and doubt.

One afternoon, when they had not been a month settled at

Fairholt, the family estate in Somerset, to which Hicks had come back after his return from India, Ralph interrupted some of his wife's purring questions with "One moment, dear, I want to show you something." He went to his library and returned with an ebony box about the size of an ordinary writing-desk. It was elaborately and beautifully carved; in the centre of the top was an enamel inset with the figure of an Indian god, and around it was scroll and leaf-work. There was no key-hole to the box, nor any obvious method of opening it; but where the key-hole should have been was the word *Tamán* in English letters, and this same word was repeated on the bottom of the box, which was otherwise perfectly plain.

"What a sweet box!" said May. "We must keep it here in the drawing-room. Where did you get it, Ralph?"

Her husband hesitated for a moment, and then began in that style which is the invariable prelude, made by the human man, to something exceptionally mean.

"May, I have always been perfectly frank with you; I have, and desire to have, no secrets from you, except the secret of that ebony box. I can tell you nothing as to where I got it, what it contains or what its possession implies. It is my one secret, and I must ask you to respect it as you trust me." Without waiting for curious and pathetic expostulation, Ralph then left the room, putting the box on a table.

The passion for knowledge is difficult to analyze; but the normal person, one may pretty safely suppose, finds his chief pleasure in the chase not in the capture; most of us value our experience in proportion to the difficulty of acquisition. With May it was otherwise; she collected facts just as some people collect stamps, and would feel it a serious grievance to be deprived of a piece of information, however unimportant, whose existence was matter of knowledge to her. Her husband's abrupt disclosure of so startling a fact as this mysterious secret left her for the moment in a condition of huddled and impotent amazement; her next instincts, as is always the case with the weak, were towards immediate and practical action; it is only those who are afraid to be alone with an idea who seek aid in force, physical or moral. May flew after Ralph, and mercilessly besieged him with indignant question and protest. To all her expostulation he replied with

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repeated requests for her confidence, requests the more maddening because she was totally unable to explain, what she nevertheless felt was true, why the appeal, in this case, was entirely unjustified.

From that afternoon the ebony box began to assume at Fairholt the position and importance which was described at the beginning. Most of us have had the unhappy experience of calling at a house just after some family bereavement or domestic quarrel. A husband and wife may sit together dry-eyed and self-controlled, talking common politeness to some casual visitor, who nevertheless can see, after five minutes' intercourse, that the only thing in their minds is a subject whose interest and importance can be measured by their avoidance of it. At first Mr Hicks' friends were puzzled at the new atmosphere in the house. They all felt, as Miss Jenkins said, that "Ralph and May talk to you as if they were away and wished that you were anywhere except with them"; but it was some months before the curious influence, immanent in the room like some strong scent, was tracked to its undoubted origin, the ebony box. The method of discovery was accidental enough. At a dinner-party, when the Hicks' still gave dinner-parties, one of the guests, a Dr Innes, picked up the box and said to Hicks, "This is a very beautiful piece of work; where—," when he was interrupted by feeling Mrs Hicks looking at him. He turned and saw her, oblivious of the company, her face fixed in a hungry appeal for knowledge, pleasurably apprehensive of the keen pain that she hoped was coming. With strained eyes, parted lips and short convulsive gasps, she strained forward anticipant of the arrival of some potent passion that would blot her body and ruin her soul; so might the Sibyl have looked as she neared the acme of her ecstasy, or the half-voluntary victim of some degrading drug or bestial indulgence. Dr Innes was only saved from anxious and indiscreet inquiries by the swift action of Ralph Hicks, who went over to his wife and, under the pretence of conjugal attentions, changed the look on her face into one of sheer and submissive terror. In similar circumstances, other events conspired to help Hicks in the game of torture that he had now definitely, however indeliberately, entered upon. He could no more help reacting upon his wife's nervous and terrified curiosity than the wall can help returning the fives' ball; and the hand of fate was apparently very hard on Mrs Hicks.

For years they lived together, a strange man with a strange woman, their only bond to be found in the fear the husband encouraged, the wife indulged and the box inspired. At times, in moments of silly optimism, Mrs Hicks would once again definitely ask her husband to tell her about the box, giving his devil's pride one more opportunity of irritating the wounds, to the nursing of which she now abandoned all the shallow intensity of which her nature was capable. More often, however, the box was as it were the conscious background against which they played the drama of life. If a man could be imagined carefully conscious of the processes of breathing or motion, it would be a slight analogy to the manner in which the ebony box entered into the lives of May and her husband. Every remark he uttered, still more every sentence that he checked half-way, was connected immediately to the secret enclosed in the box, by his wife's desperate attempts for initiation into the mystery. In his sleep he uttered disjointed sentences, of sufficient coherence to spur on May's anxiety; and the apogee of tragi-comedy was reached when she wrote to *Notes and Queries* to inquire after Indian secret societies. They practically gave up seeing any of their neighbours, who were, in truth, not a little scared by the unnatural atmosphere of the house; and it is small wonder that the visit of Gillingham, an old friend of Ralph's, who had not seen him since his marriage, should have aggravated the severe strain under which the two had lived so long.

When Gillingham arrived, one afternoon in September, there was an armistice of mere weariness between Ralph and his wife. His friend noticed some change in Hicks since his marriage, changes that he put down, manlike, to the suffering influences of matrimony, even accounting in that way for the furtive ingenuity with which Ralph invested the most ordinary remarks as though they were fraught with interior meanings. For when two people live alone, their minds unnaturally intent on one object of thought, one gradually learns to put into his conversation some hint of that mystery which the other is always suspecting. So, quite apart from direct references to the horror of his life's secret as contained in the ebony box, all Ralph's spoken words seemed so arranged as to be centripetal, so many radii that had only meaning and importance as they were related to the centre. Of what that centre

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was Roger Gillingham was of course entirely ignorant at first; but his ignorance was soon to be dissipated.

On the second evening of his visit, Gillingham and Mrs Hicks were waiting in the drawing-room for her husband, who had not finished dressing for dinner. Gillingham, to pass the time, went round the room admiring the commonplace pictures in a commonplace, genial manner, and discoursing occasionally on one in particular with that elaborate carefulness of language of a man more anxious to air his artistic vocabulary than to express his appreciation. Finally his eye fell on the ebony box, and recognizing India in its make, he took it up to pass some local and suitable remark on it to Mrs Hicks. When he turned to her, however, he saw she was looking not at him but at the door; her face, a white wedge of terror, was fixed on her husband, who stood in the doorway, on his countenance that calculated and lustful cruelty that you may mark in the debased boy who will torture a cat. The three stood then for a moment, Hicks making no pretence to hide the joy he felt, any more than Gillingham attempted to disguise his amazement or May her terror; the advent of a servant, with his formula, seemed to restore things to a more ordinary state, and Mrs Hicks fluttered out to the dining-room, followed by her guest.

Lack of imagination is a great source of worry. Gillingham spent a good few hours of the night trying to solve the mystery of the scene before dinner and the heavy gloom that shrouded the rest of the evening. At first—for he was one of those men who are egotists, not through conviction of their own ability, but merely through intellectual laziness, that makes them base things on the personality that comes first to their minds—he thought Hicks must be jealous of his wife. He soon dismissed this idea; characteristically enough, not because of his long friendship with Hicks, but because of May's unattractiveness; then he worried through most of the causes of matrimonial differences that had impinged on his brain from the perusal of third-class novels. After a troubled sleep, in which he eloped with May Hicks, and her husband with the ebony box, he awoke with a cry: "Gad! it's to do with that black box." He lay in bed pondering for some time. It was getting towards half-past six, and Gillingham, full of his clue, did not attempt to resist the temptation to get up and

inspect for himself this box which had so mysterious an effect on his old friend and his wife. It is needless to say that when Gillingham arrived in the drawing-room and picked up the ebony box he did not gain much from its inspection. He had just turned it upside down and was going to carry it to the window to investigate more carefully, when a footstep made him turn hastily, to see Ralph Hicks coming towards him. Gillingham dropped the box with a bang on the floor, looking and feeling, he could not explain why, like a school-boy caught at the jam-cupboard.

"Morning," began Gillingham; "interesting box, that; hope I haven't——"

But Hicks interrupted with a gesture and tone that was almost melodramatic.

"Don't be a damned fool, Roger. You came down to look at that box?—" ("It is the box, then," thought Gillingham.)—"Well, that box contains the secret of my life; that part of my life which no one shall share, neither you nor May."

He spoke almost as if for an audience, and Gillingham, turning from the window, saw in the doorway Mrs Hicks, with the same look of terror as on the night before, gazing not on her husband nor on his friend, but at the ebony box which lay on the floor, with the cold sunlight picking out the fantastic limbs of the god on the cover.

After that morning Gillingham vamped up some conventional excuse, and returned to his rooms in town, leaving Fairholt to its strange monotony of perplexing horror.

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Ralph dying. Come at once. He wants you.—May Hicks.

That was the telegram which, some three years afterwards, Gillingham found lying in his rooms. Not altogether unwilling to hear a death-bed confession, as he supposed would result from his answer to the summons, he put up a few things and started off that afternoon for Fairholt.

He was met at the door by Mrs Hicks. "Ralph wants to see you about the box," she said, her passion for knowledge cheering the sorrow she felt at her husband's illness, for a woman never loses all affection for a man she marries. Gillingham unconsciously drew himself up, proud at his prospective role of confidant, and

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followed Mrs Hicks to the door of the bedroom, where Hicks lay dying of pneumonia.

"The box, Roger," gasped Ralph.

"Yes?" queried Gillingham, anxious and important.

"Get it me—you, no one else; not May."

A sick man must be humoured; and so Gillingham went down to the drawing-room, murmuring his errand to Mrs Hicks on the way, as she stood, expectant, on the landing. He returned to the bedroom with the box, and put it into the invalid's hands, which let it fall, nerveless, on the bed-clothes. Gillingham, with that irrelevant logic that attacks us at moments of emotion, thought of the bang the box made when he had dropped it on the floor.

"Do you want to tell me anything, old chap?" said he to Hicks.

"Tell, tell? No, no," murmured the sick man. "Where are my keys?"

Gillingham, who had noticed the absence of any key-hole in the box, was startled at the request, but fetched the keys from where they hung and gave them his friend.

"Thanks," said Hicks; "now go."

"But—," began Gillingham.

"Don't chatter, but go; and you too," he cried, turning to the nurse. She nodded to Gillingham, and they left the sick man to his secret in the close air of the room.

Outside the door Mrs Hicks was still standing; she did not attempt to disguise the fact that she had listened to all that passed in the room. For minutes, that dragged like hours, she and Gillingham stood side by side, waiting. On the staircase was a cuckoo-clock, and the bird came out five minutes before the hour. As it sounded its absurd note, Mrs Hicks said to Gillingham: "The clock went wrong three weeks ago."

Just then came a cry from the room, baffled; then a loud shout, "Not my wife, not my wife"; and then silence. Gillingham fumbled for a few moments nervously, and then, full of his responsibility, went into the room. Ralph Hicks lay dead, with the ebony box clasped in his arms.

The next morning Mrs Hicks babbled to Gillingham the story of her married life. It left him as unenlightened as

before; and his practical sense propounded the immediate solution.

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"Mrs Hicks, the box must be opened."

That afternoon, in the presence of the doctor, the vicar and Hicks' solicitor, the ebony box was solemnly smashed open. It was perfectly empty.

To us who read the story now the explanation is not difficult. Ralph's treatment of his wife was simply a punishment, begun perhaps in fun, of her inordinate curiosity. The box, of course, never contained anything, nor had his life any mysterious secrets. In time Hicks himself got obsessed by the idea of the box, and his obsession was encouraged by the craven panic of his wife. And so the game begun so lightly ended in grim horror. But Mrs Hicks will never be content with the simple, true solution of the problem; she still believes firmly in some mysterious secret, and has even begun a course of study in Indian sociology in order to probe it. It seems likely that, as she acquires fresh information of this new kind, she will lose the terror that originally inspired the secret; and so her natural stupidity may yet be victorious over the ingenuity which played upon it so long and so mercilessly.

R. ELLIS ROBERTS