



ARNOLD BENNETT (1867-1931), born in modest surroundings at Hanley, in Staffordshire, gained a dominant position in English letters. His best work is in his stories, of which this is one, about the five pottery towns (the "Clayhanger Series"). He was one of the great money-makers among English writers—and he knew the art of spending money. The almost naïf wonder displays of wealth aroused in him called out some of his best writing.

THE MURDER OF THE MANDARIN

"WHAT's that you're saying about murder?" asked Mrs. Cheswardine as she came into the large drawing-room, carrying the supper-tray.

"Put it down here," said her husband, referring to the supper-tray, and pointing to a little table which stood two legs off and two legs on the hearthrug.

"That apron suits you immensely," murmured Woodruff, the friend of the family, as he stretched his long limbs into the fender towards the fire, farther even than the long limbs of Cheswardine. Each man occupied an easy-chair on either side of the hearth; each was very tall, and each was forty.

Mrs. Cheswardine, with a whisk infinitely graceful, set the tray on the table, took a seat behind it on a chair that looked like a toddling grand-nephew of the arm-chairs, and nervously smoothed out the apron.

As a matter of fact, the apron did suit her immensely. It is astounding, delicious, adorable, the effect of a natty little domestic apron suddenly put on over an elaborate and costly frock, especially when you can hear the rustle of a silk petticoat beneath, and more especially when the apron is smoothed out by jewelled fingers. Every man knows this. Every woman knows it. Mrs. Cheswardine knew it. In such matters Mrs. Cheswardine knew exactly what she was about. She delighted, when her husband brought Woodruff in late of a night, as he frequently did after a turn at the club, to prepare with her own hands—the servants being in bed—a little snack of supper for them. Tomato sandwiches, for instance, miraculously thin, together with champagne or Bass. The men preferred Bass, naturally, but if Mrs. Cheswardine

had a fancy for a sip of champagne out of her husband's tumbler, Bass was not forthcoming.

To-night it was champagne.

Woodruff opened it, as he always did, and involuntarily poured out a libation on the hearth, as he almost always did. Good-natured, ungainly, long-suffering men seldom achieve the art of opening champagne.

Mrs. Cheswardine tapped her pink-slipped foot impatiently.

"You're all nerves to-night," Woodruff laughed, and "you've made me nervous." And at length he got some of the champagne into a tumbler.

"No, I'm not," Mrs. Cheswardine contradicted him.

"Yes, you are, Vera," Woodruff insisted calmly.

She smiled. The use of that elegant Christian name, with its faint suggestion of Russian archduchesses, had a strange effect on her, particularly from the lips of Woodruff. She was proud of it, and of her surname too—one of the oldest surnames in the Five Towns. The syllables of "Vera" invariably soothed her, like a charm. Woodruff, and Cheswardine also, had called her Vera during the whole of her life; and she was thirty. They had all three lived in different houses at the top end of Trafalgar Road, Bursley. Woodruff fell in love with her first, when she was eighteen, but with no practical result. He was a brown-haired man, personable despite his ungainliness, but he failed to perceive that to worship from afar off is not the best way to capture a young woman with large eyes and an emotional disposition. Cheswardine, who had a black beard, simply came along and married the little thing. She fluttered down on to his shoulders like a pigeon. She adored him, feared him, cooed to him, worried him, and knew that there were depths of his mind which she would never plumb. Woodruff, after being best man, went on loving, meekly and yet philosophically, and found his chief joy in just these suppers. The arrangement suited Vera; and as for the husband and the hopeless admirer, they had always been fast friends.

"I asked you what you were saying about murder," said Vera sharply, "but it seems——"

"Oh! did you?" Woodruff apologized. "I was saying that murder isn't such an impossible thing as it appears. Any one might commit a murder."

"Then you want to defend Harrisford? Do you hear what he says, Stephen?"

The notorious and terrible Harrisford murders were agitating the Five Towns that November. People read, talked, and dreamt murder; for several weeks they took murder to all their meals.

"He doesn't want to defend Harrisford at all," said Cheswardine, with a superior masculine air, "and of course any one might commit a murder. I might."

"Stephen! How horrid you are!"

"You might, even!" said Woodruff, gazing at Vera.

"Charlie! Why, the blood alone——"

"There isn't always blood," said the oracular husband.

"Listen here," proceeded Woodruff, who read variously and enjoyed philosophical speculation. "Supposing that by just taking thought, by just wishing it, an Englishman could kill a mandarin in China and make himself rich for life, without anybody knowing anything about it! How many mandarins do you suppose there would be left in China at the end of a week?"

"At the end of twenty-four hours, rather," said Cheswardine grimly.

"Not one," said Woodruff.

"But that's absurd," Vera objected, disturbed. When these two men began their philosophical discussions they always succeeded in disturbing her. She hated to see life in a queer light. She hated to think.

"It isn't absurd," Woodruff replied. "It simply shows that what prevents wholesale murder is not the wickedness of it, but the fear of being found out, and the general mess, and seeing the corpse, and so on."

Vera shuddered.

"And I'm not sure," Woodruff proceeded, "that murder is so very much more wicked than lots of other things."

"Usury, for instance," Cheswardine put in.

"Or bigamy," said Woodruff.

"But an Englishman *couldn't* kill a mandarin in China by just wishing it," said Vera, looking up.

"How do we know?" said Woodruff, in his patient voice. "How do we know? You remember what I was telling you about thought-transference last week. It was in *Borderland*."

Vera felt as if there was no more solid ground to stand on, and it angered her to be plunging about in a bog.

"I think it's simply silly," she remarked. "No, thanks."

She said "No, thanks" to her husband, when he tendered his glass.

He moved the glass still closer to her lips.

"I said 'No, thanks,'" she repeated dryly.

"Just a mouthful," he urged.

"I'm not thirsty."

"Then you'd better go to bed," said he.

He had a habit of sending her to bed abruptly. She did not dislike it. But she had various ways of going. To-night it was the way of an archduchess.

II

WOODRUFF, in stating that Vera was all nerves that evening, was quite right. She was. And neither her husband nor Woodruff knew the reason.

The reason had to do most intimately with frocks.

Vera had been married ten years. But no one would have guessed it, to watch her girlish figure and her birdlike ways. You see, she was the only child in the house. She often bitterly regretted the absence of offspring to the name and honour of Cheswardine. She envied other wives their babies. She doted on babies. She said continually that in her deliberate opinion the proper mission of women was babies. She was the sort of woman that regards a cathedral as a place built especially to sit in and dream soft domestic dreams; the sort of woman that adores music simply because it makes her dream. And Vera's brown studies, which were frequent, consisted chiefly of babies. But as babies amused themselves by coming down the chimneys of all the other houses in Bursley, and avoiding her house, she sought comfort in frocks. She made the best of herself. And it was a good best. Her figure was as near perfect as a woman's can be, and then there were those fine emotional eyes, and that flutteringness of the pigeon, and an ever-changing charm of gesture. Vera had become the best-dressed woman in Bursley. And that is saying something. Her husband was wealthy, with an increasing income, though, of course, as an earthenware manufacturer, and the son and grandson of an earthenware manufacturer, he joined heartily in the general Five Towns lamentation that there was no longer any money to be made out of "pots." He liked to have a well-dressed woman about the house, and he allowed her an incredible allowance, the amount of which was breathed with awe among Vera's friends; a hundred a year, in fact. He paid it to her quarterly, by cheque. Such was his method.

Now a ball was to be given by the members of the Ladies'

Hockey Club (or such of them as had not been maimed for life in the pursuit of this noble pastime) on the very night after the conversation about murder. Vera belonged to the Hockey Club (in a purely ornamental sense), and she had procured a frock for the ball which was calculated to crown her reputation as a mirror of elegance. The skirt had—but no (see the columns of the *Staffordshire Signal* for the 9th November 1901). The mischief was that the gown lacked, for its final perfection, one particular thing, and that particular thing was separated from Vera by the glass front of Brunt's celebrated shop at Hanbridge. Vera could have managed without it. The gown would still have been brilliant without it. But Vera had seen it, and she *wanted* it.

Its cost was a guinea.

Well, you will say, what is a guinea to a dainty creature with a hundred a year? Let her go and buy the article. The point is that she couldn't, because she had only six and sevenpence left in the wide world. (And six weeks to Christmas!) She had squandered—oh, soul above money!—twenty-five pounds, and more than twenty-five pounds, since the 29th of September. Well, you will say, credit, in other words, tick? No, no, no! The giant Stephen absolutely and utterly forbade her to procure anything whatever on credit. She was afraid of him. She knew just how far she could go with Stephen. He was great and terrible. Well, you will say, why couldn't she blandish and cajole Stephen for a sovereign or so? Impossible! She had a hundred a year on the clear understanding that it was never exceeded nor anticipated. Well, you will discreetly hint, there are certain devices known to housewives. . . . Hush! Vera had already employed them. Six and sevenpence was not merely all that remained to her of her dress allowance; it was all that remained to her of her household allowance till the next Monday.

Hence her nerves.

There that poor unfortunate woman lay, with her unconscious tyrant of a husband snoring beside her, desolately wakeful under the night-light in the large, luxurious bedroom—three servants sleeping overhead, champagne in the cellar, furs in the wardrobe, valuable lace round her neck at that very instant, grand piano in the drawing-room, horses in the stable, stuffed bear in the hall—and her life was made a blank for want of fourteen and fivepence! And she had nobody to confide in. How true it is that the human soul is solitary, that content is the only true riches, and that to be happy we must be good!

It was at that juncture of despair that she thought of mandarins. Or rather—I may as well be frank—she had been thinking of mandarins all the time since retiring to rest. There *might* be something in Charlie's mandarin theory. . . . According to Charlie, so many queer, inexplicable things happened in the world. Occult—subliminal—astral—thought-waves. These expressions and many more occurred to her as she recollected Charlie's disconcerting conversations. There *might*. . . . One never knew.

Suddenly she thought of her husband's pockets, bulging with silver, with gold, and with bank-notes. Tantalizing vision! No! She could not steal. Besides, he might wake up.

And she returned to mandarins. She got herself into a very morbid and two-o'clock-in-the-morning state of mind. Suppose it was a dodge that *did* work. (Of course, she was extremely superstitious; we all are.) She began to reflect seriously upon China. She remembered having heard that Chinese mandarins were very corrupt; that they ground the faces of the poor, and put innocent victims to the torture; in short, that they were sinful and horrid persons, scoundrels unfit for mercy. Then she pondered upon the remotest parts of China, regions where Europeans never could penetrate. No doubt there was some unimportant mandarin, somewhere in these regions, to whose district his death would be a decided blessing, to kill whom would indeed be an act of humanity. Probably a mandarin without wife or family; a bachelor mandarin whom no relative would regret; or, in the alternative, a mandarin with many wives, whose disgusting polygamy merited severe punishment! An old mandarin already pretty nearly dead; or, in the alternative, a young one just commencing a career of infamy!

"I'm awfully silly," she whispered to herself. "But still, if there *should* be anything in it. And I must, I must, I must have that thing for my dress!"

She looked again at the dim forms of her husband's clothes, pitched anyhow on an ottoman. No! She could not stoop to theft!

So she murdered a mandarin; lying in bed there; not any particular mandarin, a vague mandarin, the mandarin most convenient and suitable under all the circumstances. She deliberately wished him dead, on the off-chance of acquiring riches, or, more accurately, because she was short of fourteen and fivepence in order to look perfectly splendid at a ball.

In the morning when she woke up—her husband had already departed to the works—she thought how foolish she had been in the night. She did not feel sorry for having desired the sudden death of a fellow-creature. Not at all. She felt sorry because she was convinced, in the cold light of day, that the charm would not work. Charlie's notions were really too ridiculous, too preposterous. No! She must reconcile herself to wearing a ball dress which was less than perfection, and all for want of fourteen and fivepence. And she had more nerves than ever!

She had nerves to such an extent that when she went to unlock the drawer of her own private toilet-table, in which her prudent and fussy husband forced her to lock up her rings and brooches every night, she attacked the wrong drawer—an empty unfastened drawer that she never used. And lo! the empty drawer was not empty. There was a sovereign lying in it!

This gave her a start, connecting the discovery, as naturally at the first blush she did, with the mandarin.

Surely it couldn't be, after all.

Then she came to her senses. What absurdity! A coincidence, of course, nothing else! Besides, a mere sovereign! It wasn't enough. Charlie had said "rich for life." The sovereign must have lain there for months and months, forgotten.

However, it was none the less a sovereign. She picked it up, thanked Providence, ordered the dog-cart, and drove straight to Brunt's. The particular thing that she acquired was an exceedingly thin, slim, and fetching silver belt—a marvel for the money, and the ideal waist decoration for her wonderful white muslin gown. She bought it, and left the shop.

And as she came out of the shop, she saw a street urchin holding out the poster of the early edition of the *Signal*. And she read on the poster, in large letters: "DEATH OF LI HUNG CHANG." It is no exaggeration to say that she nearly fainted. Only by the exercise of that hard self-control, of which women alone are capable, did she refrain from tumbling against the blue-clad breast of Adams, the Cheswardine coachman.

She purchased the *Signal* with well-feigned calm, opened it and read: "*Stop-press news. Peking. Li Hung Chang, the celebrated Chinese statesman, died at two o'clock this morning.—Reuter.*"

III

VERA reclined on the sofa that afternoon, and the sofa was drawn round in front of the drawing-room fire. And she wore her fluffiest and languidest *peignoir*. And there was a perfume of eau-de-Cologne in the apartment. Vera was having a headache; she was having it in her grand, her official manner. Stephen had had to lunch alone. He had been told that in all probability his suffering wife would not be well enough to go to the ball. Whereupon he had grunted. As a fact, Vera's headache was extremely real, and she was very upset indeed.

The death of Li Hung Chang was heavily on her soul. Occultism was justified of itself. The affair lay beyond coincidence. She had always *known* that there was something in occultism, supernaturalism, so-called superstitions, what not. But she had never expected to prove the faith that was in her by such a homicidal act on her own part. It was detestable of Charlie to have mentioned the thing at all. He had no right to play with fire. And as for her husband, words could give but the merest rough outline of her resentment against Stephen. A pretty state of things that a woman with a position such as she had to keep up should be reduced to six and sevenpence! Stephen, no doubt, expected her to visit the pawnshop. It would serve him right if she did so—and he met her coming out under the three brass balls! Did she not dress solely and wholly to please him? Not in the least to please herself! Personally she had a mind set on higher things, impossible aspirations. But he liked fine clothes. And it was her duty to satisfy him. She strove to satisfy him in all matters. She lived for him. She sacrificed herself to him completely. And what did she get in return? Nothing! Nothing! Nothing! All men were selfish. And women were their victims. . . . Stephen, with his silly bullying rules against credit and so forth. . . . The worst of men was that they had no sense.

She put a new dose of eau-de-Cologne on her forehead, and leaned on one elbow. On the mantelpiece lay the tissue parcel containing the slim silver belt, the price of Li's death. She wanted to stick it in the fire. And only the fact that it would not burn prevented her savagely doing so. There was something wrong, too, with the occultism. To receive a paltry sovereign for murdering the greatest statesman of the

Eastern hemisphere was simply grotesque. Moreover, she had most distinctly not wanted to deprive China of a distinguished man. She had expressly stipulated for an inferior and insignificant mandarin, one that could be spared and that was unknown to Reuter. She supposed she ought to have looked up China at the Wedgwood Institution and selected a definite mandarin with a definite place of residence. But could she be expected to go about a murder deliberately like that?

With regard to the gross inadequacy of the fiscal return for her deed, perhaps that was her own fault. She had not wished for more. Her brain had been so occupied by the belt that she had wished only for the belt. But, perhaps, on the other hand, vast wealth was to come. Perhaps something might occur that very night. That would be better. Yet would it be better? However rich she might become, Stephen would coolly take charge of her riches, and dole them out to her, and make rules for her concerning them. And besides, Charlie would suspect her guilt. Charlie understood her, and perused her thoughts far better than Stephen did. She would never be able to conceal the truth from Charlie. The conversation, the death of Li within two hours, and then a sudden fortune accruing to her—Charlie would inevitably put two and two together and divine her shameful secret.

The outlook was thoroughly black anyway.

She then fell asleep.

When she awoke, some considerable time afterwards, Stephen was calling to her. It was his voice, indeed, that had aroused her. The room was dark.

"I say, Vera," he demanded, in a low, slightly inimical tone, "have you taken a sovereign out of the empty drawer in your toilet-table?"

"No," she said quickly, without thinking.

"Ah!" he observed reflectively, "I knew I was right." He paused, and added coldly, "If you aren't better you ought to go to bed."

Then he left her, shutting the door with a noise that showed a certain lack of sympathy with her headache.

She sprang up. Her first feeling was one of thankfulness that that brief interview had occurred in darkness. So Stephen was aware of the existence of the sovereign! The sovereign was not occult. Possibly he had put it there. And what did he know he was "right" about?

She lighted the gas, and gazed at herself in the glass

realizing that she no longer had a headache, and endeavouring to arrange her ideas.

"What's this?" said another voice at the door. She glanced round hastily, guiltily. It was Charlie.

"Steve telephoned me you were too ill to go to the dance," explained Charlie, "so I thought I'd come and make inquiries. I quite expected to find you in bed with a nurse and a doctor or two at least. What is it?" He smiled.

"Nothing," she replied. "Only a headache. It's gone now."

She stood against the mantelpiece, so that he should not see the white parcel.

"That's good," said Charlie.

There was a pause.

"Strange, Li Hung Chang dying last night, just after we had been talking about killing mandarins," she said. She could not keep off the subject. It attracted her like a snake, and she approached it in spite of the fact that she fervently wished not to approach it.

"Yes," said Charlie. "But Li wasn't a mandarin, you know. And he didn't die after we had been talking about mandarins. He died before."

"Oh! I thought it said in the paper he died at two o'clock this morning."

"Two a.m. in Peking," Charlie answered. "You must remember that Peking time is many hours earlier than our time. It lies so far eastward."

"Oh!" she said again.

Stephen hurried in, with a worried air.

"Ah! It's you, Charlie!"

"She isn't absolutely dying, I find," said Charlie, turning to Vera: "You are going to the dance after all—aren't you?"

"I say, Vera," Stephen interrupted, "either you or I must have a scene with Martha. I've always suspected that confounded housemaid. So I put a marked sovereign in a drawer this morning, and it was gone at lunch-time. She'd better hook it instantly. Of course I shan't prosecute."

"Martha!" cried Vera. "Stephen, what on earth are you thinking of? I wish you would leave the servants to me. If you think you can manage this house in your spare time from the works, you are welcome to try. But don't blame me for the consequences." Glances of triumph flashed in her eyes.

"But I tell you——"

"Nonsense," said Vera. "I took the sovereign. I saw it there and I took it, and just to punish you, I've spent it. It's not at all nice to lay traps for servants like that."

"Then why did you tell me just now you hadn't taken it?" Stephen demanded crossly.

"I didn't feel well enough to argue with you then," Vera replied.

"You've recovered precious quick," retorted Stephen with grimness.

"Of course, if you want to make a scene before strangers," Vera whimpered (poor Charlie a stranger!), "I'll go to bed."

Stephen knew when he was beaten.

She went to the Hockey dance, though. She and Stephen and Charlie and his young sister, aged seventeen, all descended together to the Town Hall in a brougham. The young girl admired Vera's belt excessively, and looked forward to the moment when she too should be a bewitching and captivating wife like Vera, in short, a woman of the world, worshipped by grave, bearded men. And both the men were under the spell of Vera's incurable charm, capricious, surprising, exasperating, indefinable, indispensable to their lives.

"Stupid superstitions!" reflected Vera. "But of course I never believed it really."

And she cast down her eyes to gloat over the belt.