

THE BLUE BUCKLE

A BAFFLING MYSTERY AND BREATHLESS TALE OF ADVENTURE

By WILLIAM HAMILTON OSBORNE

Author of "The Red Mouse," "The Running Fight," "Catspaw," Etc.

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SYNOPSIS

On board a transatlantic liner returning from Europe, Craig Rutherford falls in love with a woman, a Mrs. Talbot, who seems to be troubled by something, but refuses his help, and spends most of the time with her invalid husband. Also on board is Baron Helderman, an unscrupulous character who makes a business proposition to Rutherford, and in a conversation says that he suspects the Talbots of something. He directs attention to a blue buckle worn by Mrs. Talbot. Later Helderman tells the wireless operator to let him have a message.

The message he takes is that a valuable pearl necklace is being smuggled into this country. An elderly man and a young woman are guilty. A man, however, is directed against the Talbots. Later Mrs. Talbot is attacked by a thief, who attempts to snatch the blue buckle from her. Craig Rutherford, however, catches the woman, but loses her catches a glimpse of her in Helderman's suite with her arms about his neck.

At the dock, New York, Mrs. Talbot forces her way into Craig's cabin and begs him to drive her home. As they examine the house, Craig attempts to draw her into love, but Mrs. Talbot's voice is heard, warning him of his presence.

CHAPTER VIII—(Continued)

The moment a sound came from the door, he opened it.

Dusk was softening the rich colors of his rooms; and she glided in like another of the shadows. She wore a more elaborate gown than he had ever seen on her. Black and clinging, it revealed flashes of vivid yet beautiful pink where the edges of the fabric fell back. A large "picture" hat, covered with ostrich plumes and lined under the brim with a similar pink, completed a strikingly handsome costume.

Without a word, eager to feast his eyes upon her, he closed the door and flashed on the light. The girl who stood before him was not Miss Ballantyne.

"You are surprised, Monsieur," she said, smiling at his apparent discomfiture. "I am pleased," he replied gallantly. "Even though you must have expected someone else," she chided, with the intuition of a woman.

"That should not make your welcome any the less genuine," he insisted, with the natural instinct of mankind to flatter a pretty woman.

"You see, I have not forgotten your kindness," she said, leaning upon him in the conscious power of her beauty.

"It was nothing," he said.

"You are wrong," she contradicted; "it was much—it was a Paquin gown!"

The lady was his nearest acquaintance on shipboard, whom he had rescued from the clutches of the steamer chair. She laughed exultantly, eyes and teeth flashing, as she leaned back at ease in the chair she had taken upon his gesture of invitation. The edge of her long, slimy wrap—one of those charming affairs which Paris alone knows how to create, enhancing the beauty of the lines with a pretense of concealment—fell back, and the sinuous grace of her figure was displayed as unconsciously and picturesquely as if an artist had posed her.

"Then I am glad to have saved it," he observed, admiring the picture she made, but wondering what could possibly bring her to him, and how she knew where to locate him.

"Monsieur, you have forgotten something!" she exclaimed.

"Indeed?" he puzzled.

"Yes—my name! I can tell!" she cried, clapping her hands with the pretty abandon of a child who has discovered a flaw in the facial perfection of a grown-up person.

"I am afraid I have," he acknowledged; "though I should scarcely forget the lady herself."

"Now you are trying to—what do you Americans call it?—make good," she said gaily. "Well, it is Arany—Irene Arany."

A more impressive man than was Rutherford just at this time might have fallen a willing victim to the indubitable charm of this girl. He knew that her self-possession under circumstances that would have made a more conventional woman uncomfortable argued a broader freedom than the woman's own gesture evinced were inclined to take. He felt that, despite her seeming artlessness, she was not so frank and genuine as she pre-

tended. It would be best for him to come to the point of this interview.

"Mademoiselle Arany, if there is any way in which I can be of service—"

She interrupted him, the look of bright interest in her eyes changing to one of shy entreaty.

"Indeed, it is because I do wish your assistance that I am here, Monsieur. I have sought you ever since you left the ship. You are generous and kind—I am sure that it is so. And I have said, Monsieur Rutherford will help me!"

Rutherford bowed for her to proceed.

"Monsieur, I have reason to believe that you have in your possession—"

"A diamond necklace?" Rutherford interrupted in turn. At her words, and also because his mind was saturated with the subject, he had jumped to the conclusion that here was the woman concerned in the smuggling game. He would surprise her, and thus perhaps learn something of advantage. But the surprise reflected upon him when she replied simply and with evident candor:

"No, Monsieur, I know of no necklace."

She paused, with the first trace of embarrassment she had shown during the interview. As he said nothing, she continued slowly:

"I have reason to believe that you have in your possession—a blue buckle."

Rutherford started in spite of himself. The woman's direct eyes, that her chance shot had struck home. Dissemble as he might, Craig knew that he could not recover his lost ground. But the blue buckle again! Who under the blue canopy of heaven could have suspected this?

"A blue buckle—" he repeated meditatively, striving time to fathom her reason for inquiring about the ornament.

"Ah, Monsieur, if you only knew how much it means to me!" he exclaimed.

She laid her hand impulsively upon his coat sleeve, look and gesture plainly telling him of her desire to obtain the buckle, and her readiness to employ all her feminine wiles for this purpose. But again he stole himself to her charms.

"Mademoiselle, there are blue buckles and blue buckles," he parried. "Granted that I had one in my possession, which would not be the most surprising thing in the world, how should I know it to be the one you seek?"

"Will you not just let me see it," she pleaded, her face drawing closer to his, as she looked up into his eyes.

"Can you not give me some description of it, so that I may know what you have in mind?" he replied cautiously.

An envelope from which he had lately extracted a letter lay upon the table near her. She seized it and began, with a gold pencil, to sketch an outline rapidly upon the white reverse side. Rutherford followed her with absorbed attention. The buckle—their buckle—began to appear under the deft strokes of the artist, and finally stood complete, with one important omission, before his eyes.

"There—is that it?" she asked, watching him.

He knit his brows, but gave no sign of recognition.

She placed a slender, gloved finger along the upper and lower edge of the sketch.

"Go on there anything—a pattern, or letters, along here?" she perished.

The woman must be a wizard to divine so much! How she could know, in the first place, that he had the buckle at all, amazed him.

"If there is—I shall see," he replied slowly.

Mademoiselle Arany took her pencil again, and carefully sketched in the letters.

"O B R I V I E S A P I P S E"

"That's a queer jargon!" he commented, as though it were quite new to him.

Following a plan he had conceived, he arose and went into a smaller room adjoining his stateroom—a sort of den in which stood a small desk and a safe just beside it. He could see, without

appearing to turn, that she had stepped silently in line with the door, and was gazing curiously into this room. The light shone through the door, revealing the safe plainly.

Craig opened its heavy door, and seemed to examine something within it, uncertainly. He picked up a small object and returned to the front room with it in his closed hand.

Mademoiselle Arany had retreated to her former place, and now looked up with an appearance of languid interest; but the quick dilation of her nostrils showed him how keenly she was interested in his next move.

"Dardon me—do you smoke, Mademoiselle?" he asked, opening his hand. It contained a package of cigarettes.

The woman sprang up. "You are trifling with me!" she exclaimed indignantly.

"Not at all," he answered with an appearance of candor. "But I did not find just exactly the buckle you seek."

"Then you have the other buckle?" she exclaimed.

It was again his turn to be surprised, but he masked it under a show of indifference.

"There are two buckles?" he asked.

"I believe so," she answered, biting her lip. "If I might see yours and compare them?"

"What is the inscription on the other one?"

She saw that she was beaten; and as she swept out of the room, eyes flashing scorn and resentment, she announced out—

"If I knew that, I shouldn't have called!"

Craig stood, pondering, after she had gone. Something in her tones stirred memories within him. Where had he heard just that tone of voice before?—and when?

Suddenly it came to him—a woman's voice, wafted down the wind—at midnight, on the Gothic?—nowhere, do you understand?—anywhere, do you understand?—why were "they" not "safe"?

Craig sighed and gave it up. It was just a mystery along with other mysteries.

CHAPTER IX

THE HOUSE ON RIVERSIDE DRIVE

Rutherford was amused at the angry exit of his visitor. She was too warmly beautiful in her rage to be regarded with sternness.

"She wants that buckle," he reflected; "now I wonder why! And the fact that there are two of them makes it rather interesting. Two women—two buckles! The women of the same general type, to outward appearance—the buckles evidently identical, save for a bit of jargon scratched upon them?"

Rutherford shrugged his shoulders, and gave over trying to unravel this double tangle which had sprung up to take the place of the complicated single one. He had other affairs to concern him, and one was—dinner.

"If she hadn't been in such a hurry, I might have asked her to dine!" he said to himself, whimsically; "she doesn't seem to care about it."

He put on his hat and went out and enjoyed a good dinner, as if he hadn't another interest in the world. Then he came back to get coat, hat and gloves, and prepared to finish his letters. Again this task was doomed to interruption. The telephone called him again.

"A gentleman has called you up, two or three times in the last hour," the operator's voice said.

"Did you get his number?"

"Yes, sir; it was 98605, Riverside Drive, and he asked you kindly to call him up."

"Hmm," pondered Rutherford. "I don't remember any such number. I guess if he wants me badly, he'll ring again."

Which he did. In less than ten minutes Craig was summoned to the wire by a voice that made him start slightly. It was that of Helderman. Could Mr. Rutherford be so good as to call this evening? Rutherford's first impulse was to decline, but a second thought showed him the wisdom of accepting.

"Glad to come, I'll be there in half an hour," he said.

Rutherford was already dressed for the evening, and it was the work of only a few minutes to get coat, hat and gloves. At the door of the Sandhulham he found a waiting taxi.

"Corner of Riverside Drive and West street," he called to the chauffeur, as he climbed into the cab.

"Helderman's, sir?" asked the man.

"You know the place?" Craig held the door open to ask.

"I point it out to rubber-necks," was the response.

Rutherford was not surprised to learn that Helderman's home was one of the sights of the town. It was only natural that he should build something showy and ostentatious. But Craig was not quite prepared for the kind of house that he presently drew up before.

There, on one of the most commanding knolls of the stately Drive, stood a great cube of white marble, simple and stately in a wide expanse of lawn that spoke with simple eloquence of the wealth which could annex so much valuable real estate. Helderman was indeed a part-master in the art of making himself noticeable. Here he had gone to the other extreme of ostentation, by the paradox of a simplicity and severity which must impress every passerby.

The house had its intended effect now, and Rutherford felt his interest and appreciation of Helderman's cleverness increased tenfold.

"That's Helderman! That's him, sure!" exclaimed the chauffeur, as he held the door open for his passenger to alight. He was evidently keenly interested in the upstart and all that he did, for this great palace helped to make the ride entertaining to his fare.

There, indeed, was Helderman, plainly

visible from the curb. Rutherford smiled as he saw him move across the room, with his peculiar, jerky stride. His smile changed to wonder as he watched.

Helderman stood still. He was as distinctly visible to the two watchers on the sidewalk as if he were standing in the lawn in broad daylight, instead of in an artificially lighted room. The effect was startling. The next moment, Craig realized that almost the whole front side of the room in which the banker moved about must be a huge, plateglass window.

This was certainly an extraordinary

frank on the owner's part! Who but Helderman would have conceived the idea of living in a show window? So clear was the plateglass barrier between him and the outside world that it actually seemed not to exist at all.

Back and forth Helderman paced as if in deep thought. He seemed utterly oblivious of the fact that a large audience might have been occupying advantageous places along the sidewalk. Yet Rutherford knew that he could not be forgotten of the espionage that his carefully-arranged window made possible. It seemed as if he wanted to be seen.

As he watched, Rutherford recalled

sharply to mind the queer mannerisms which he had noted on that wild-goose chase through the lower decks of the ship for a mystery that was finally located, where Helderman knew all the time that it was, on the upper deck. The case and this window were equally baffling to Rutherford. He could only assign them to one and the same cause—the unexplainable.

Another of the financier's extraordinary whims was the fence. If the window invited the idle gazer the massive barrier of white marble, surmounted by sharp pickets, discouraged intrusion. Cer-

tainly it was a queer and contradictory arrangement.

Rutherford moved toward the half gambling in his own mind the chances of finding it some fragile affair that would give the lie to the formidable fence just as the latter at once with the generous widow. A slight sound behind him caused him to stop and turn suddenly. A man who placed back of him also stopped, glanced around for the last time, and driver might be taking this opportunity to stretch his legs; but the taxi was being off deliberately around the corner.

(CONTINUED MONDAY)

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CHILDREN'S CORNER

TIMMY GRAYTAIL HAS A SURPRISE

NOW all the time that Timmy Graytail and Billy Robin were talking about spring and were rolling and frisking on the soft ground, somebody was right close up to them—so close that, if he had been awake, this somebody could have heard every word they said! Yes, sir—every word! And he wouldn't have liked what they said either!

For this same somebody who was so close to Billy Robin and to Timmy Graytail was a very jealous person—a person who liked to believe that he was the most feared and respected person in the whole world. He wouldn't have liked to hear how anxious they were for spring!

But, of course, Billy and Timmy knew nothing about his being near, so they were very careless as to what they said. Who was this person? Haven't you guessed? Well, wait a minute and you will.

"Just to think," gloated Timmy Graytail in delight, "winter is all over! Now we can have fresh, soft, green grass tips to eat! No more winter stored nuts for me!"

"And I can build me a new nest and get ready for summer," chirped Billy Robin as he pecked at the soft earth. "Jack Frost has gone for good, and I can get to work! Hurray!"

"Jack Frost has gone for good?" muttered a sleepy voice close by, "what's that they are saying about me?" (Yes, the nearby person was old Jack Frost, just as you must have suspected!) "I guess I'd better wake up from my nap and see what this talk is all about!" So

lazy Jack Frost stretched and turned under the bushes where he had hidden for a bit of rest, and pricked his ears to see what was going on in the world. He was hidden in front of the bush where he was hidden. Jack Frost saw Billy Robin, heard him talking to Timmy Graytail and saw just how happy they both were with the thought of spring.

Now you would think that when he saw how much they wanted spring, how happy they were over thinking it was coming, that Jack Frost would say to himself, "There now! Those nice little creatures of the spring, so I'll just slip quietly off to my North Pole home and let the spring come! I don't want to disappoint them! Not for one minute!"

That is, you might think he'd say that if you didn't know Jack Frost! But, knowing Jack Frost, you'd know perfectly well that he wouldn't even think of doing or saying any such thing as that. You would know that he would immediately wake up and make a cold storm at once. Yes, that is exactly what he did.

He raised himself out of the bushes where he had been sleeping, blew a cold breath across the grass, and then sent for his helpers, the wind and the snow. It wasn't an hour till the soft ground was frozen stiff, till the air was cold and frosty and a film of fresh snow lay on the ground.

Timmy Graytail and Billy Robin were so amazed and disappointed they couldn't say a word; they just ran for shelter and hid away as tight as they could till the storm would be over.

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NO. 65—ASTHMA SIMPSON, THE VILLAGE QUEEN—SAY! IF SIM SIMPSON ACCEPTS THIS EXPLANATION, WE SHOULD WORRY, HUH?

