

# THE DIVA'S RUBY

By F. MARION CRAWFORD

## CHAPTER I.

THERE is a ruby mine hidden in the heart of the mountains near a remote little city of Central Asia, known only to two European travelers; and the secret of the treasure belongs to the two chief families of the place, and has been carefully guarded for many generations, handed down through the men from father to son; and often the children of these two families have married, yet none of the women ever learned the way to the mine from her father, or her brother, or her husband, none excepting one only, and her name was Baraka (which may perhaps mean "Blessed"; but no blessing came to her when she was born). She was much whiter and much more beautiful than the other girls of the little Tartar city; her face was oval like an ostrich egg, her skin was as the cream that rises on sheep's milk at evening, and her eyes were like the Pools of Peace in the Valley of Dark Moons; her waist also was a slender pillar of ivory; and round her ankle she could make her thumb meet her second finger; as for her feet, they were small and quick and silent as young mice. But she was not blessed.

When she was in her seventeenth year a traveler came to the little city who was not like her own people. He was goodly to see, and her eyes were troubled by the sight of him, as the Pools of Peace are darkened when the clouds lie on the mountain tops and sleep all day; for the stranger was tall and very fair, and his beard was like spun gold, and he feared neither man nor evil spirit, going about alone by day and night. Furthermore, he was a great physician, and possessed a small book, about the size of a man's hand, in which was contained all the knowledge of the world. By means of this book, and three small buttons that tasted of mingled salt and sugar, he cured Baraka's father of a mighty pain in the midriff which had tormented him a whole week. He brought with him also a written letter from a holy man to the chiefs of the town; therefore they did not kill him, though he had a good Mauser revolver with ammunition, worth much money, and other things useful to believers.

Satan entered the heart of Baraka, and she loved the traveler who dwelt in her father's house, for she was not blessed; and she stood before him in the way when he went out, and when he returned she was sitting at the door watching, and she took care to show her cream white arm, and her slender ankle, and even her beautiful face when neither her father nor her mother was

**EDITOR'S NOTE.**—When Mr. Crawford was in the United States last June, he contracted to write a serial story for SUNDAY MAGAZINE readers, and in keeping with his fondness for writing on the water, or within sound of falling waters whenever it is possible to do so, he began work upon "The Diva's Ruby" immediately his steamer left her pier in New York. It is therefore his most recent work, and he considers it one of the best novels he has written.

near. But he saw little and cared less, and was as grave as her father and the other graybeards of the town.

When she perceived that he was not moved by the sight of her, she watched him more closely; for she said in her girl's heart that the eyes that are blind to a beautiful woman see one of three things,—gold, or power, or heaven,—but her sight was fixed only on him. Then her throat was dry, her heart fluttered in her maiden breast like a frightened bird, and sometimes, when she would have tried to speak, she felt as if her tongue was broken and useless; the fire ran lightly along her delicate body, her eyes saw nothing clearly, and a strange rushing sound filled her ears; and then, all at once, a fine dew wet her forehead and cooled it, and she trembled all over and was as pale as death,—like Sappho, when a certain godlike man was near. Yet the stranger saw nothing, and his look was bright and cold as a winter's morning in the mountains.

Almost every day he went out and climbed the foothills alone, and when the sun was lowering he came back bringing herbs and flowers, which he

dried carefully and spread between leaves of gray paper in a large book; and he wrote spells beside them in an unknown tongue, so that no one dared to touch the book when he went out, lest the genii should wake and come out from between the pages, to blind the curious, and strike the gossips dumb, and cast a leprosy on the thief.

At night he lay on the roof of the forehouse beside the gate of the court, because it was cool there. Baraka came to him, before midnight, when her mother was in a deep sleep; she knelt at his side while he slept in the starlight, and laid her head beside his on the sack that was his pillow, and for a little while she was happy, being near him, though he did not know she was there. But presently she remembered that her mother might wake and call her, and she spoke very softly, close to his ear, fearing greatly lest he should start from his sleep and cry out.

"The ruby mine is not far off," she said. "I know the secret place. Rubies! Rubies! Rubies! You shall have as many as you can carry of the blood red rubies!"

He opened his eyes, and even in the starlight they were bright and cold. She stroked his hand softly, and then pressed it a little.

"Come with me and you shall know the great secret of their hiding place!" she whispered.

"You shall fill this sack that is under your head, and then you shall take me with you to Egypt, and we will live in a marble palace, and have many slaves, and be always together. For you will always remember that it was Baraka who showed you where the rubies were, and even when you are tired of her you will treat her kindly and feed her with fig paste and fat quails, such as I hear they have in the south all winter, and Italian rice, and coffee that has been picked over, bean by bean, for the great men."

She said all this in a whisper, stroking his hand; and while she whispered he smiled in his great golden beard that seemed as silvery in the starlight as her father's.

"That is woman's talk," he answered. "Who has ever seen mines of rubies? And if you know where they are, why should you show them to me? You are betrothed. If you had knowledge of hidden treasures, you would keep it for your husband. This is some trick to destroy me."

"May these hands wither to the wrists if a hair of your head be harmed through me!" she answered;



"I Would Rather Die by Your Hand Than Be Alive in Another Man's Arms."