The Carpet from Bagdad

by HAROLD MACGRATH

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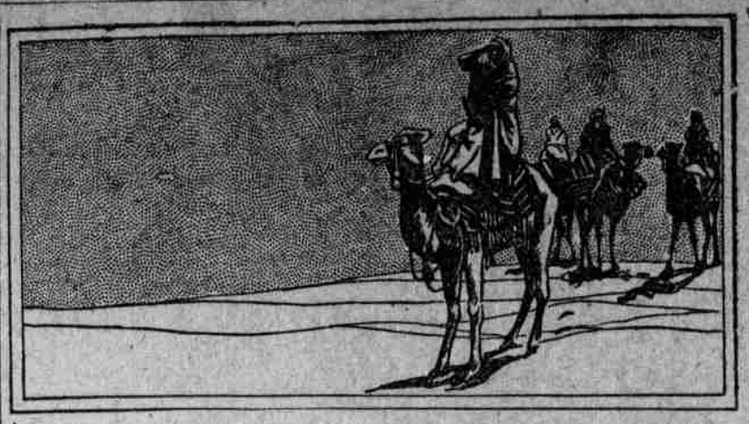

"She Shall Never Marry a Man of Your Stamp."

The Porter Had No Suspicion That a Bold Theft Was Being Committed.

SYNOPSIS.

George Percival Algernon Jones, vice-president of the Metropolitan [illegible] Rug company of New York, thirsting for romance, is in Cairo on a business trip. Horace Ryanne arrives at the hotel in Cairo with a carefully guarded bundle. Ryanne sells Jones the famous holy Yhiordes rug which he admits having stolen from a pasha at Bagdad. Jones meets Major Callahan and later is introduced to Fortune Chedsoye by a woman to whom he had loaned 150 pounds at Monte Carlo some months previously, and who turns out to be Fortune's mother. Jones takes Mrs. Chedsoye and Fortune to a polo game. Fortune returns to Jones the money borrowed by her mother. Mrs. Chedsoye appears to be engaged in some mysterious enterprise unknown to the daughter. Ryanne interests Jones in the United Romance and Adventure company, a concern which for a price will arrange any kind of an adventure to order. Mrs. Chedsoye, her brother, Major Callahan, Wallace and Ryanne, as the United Romance and Adventure company, plan a risky enterprise involving Jones.

CHAPTER VII.—(Continued.)

"I accept it as such. I am tired of petty things. I repeat, failure is not possible. Have I not thought it out, detail by detail, mapped out each line, anticipated dangers by eliminating them?"

"All but that one danger of which we know nothing. You're a great woman, Kate. You have, as you say, made ninety-nine dangers out of a hundred impossible. Let us keep an eye out for that hundredth. Our photographs have yet to grace the rogues' gallery."

"With one exception." Ryanne's laughter was sardonic.

"Whose?" shot the major.

"Mine. A round and youthful phiz, a silky young mustache. But rest easy; there's no likeness between that and the original one I wear now."

"You never told me . . . " began Mrs. Chedsoye.

"There was never any need till now. Eight years ago. Certain powers that be worked toward my escape. But I was never to return. You will recollect that I have always remained this side. Enough. What I did does not matter. I will say this much: my crime was in being found out. One venture into New York and out to sea again; they will not have a chance. I doubt if any could recall the circumstances of my meteoric career. You will observe that I am keyed for anything. Let us get to work. It doesn't matter, anyhow."

"You did not . . . " Mrs. Chedsoye hesitated.

"Blood?" reading her thought. "No, Gioconda; my hands are guiltless, at least they were till this Bagdad affair; and I am not sure there. I was a trusted clerk; I gambled; I took money that did not belong to me. And here I am, room number 208."

"It doesn't matter. Come, Kate; don't stare at Hoddy as if he were a new species." The major smoothed the ends of his moustache. "This confession will be good for his soul."

"Yes, Gioconda; I feel easier now. I am heart and soul in this affair. I need excitement, too. Lord, yes. When I went to Bagdad, I had no idea that I should ever lay eyes upon that rug. But I did. And there's the emeralds, too, major."

The major rubbed his hands pleasurably. "Yes, yes; the emeralds; I had not forgotten them. One hundred lovely green stones, worth not a penny under thirty thousand. A fine collection. But another idea [illegible] possession of this teeming brain of mine. Have you noticed how this fellow Jones hovers about Fortune? He's worth a million, if he's worth a cent. I am sure, in pure gratitude, she would see to it that her loved ones were well taken care of in their old age."

"I am going to marry Fortune myself," said Ryanne blandly.

"You?" The major was nonplussed.

Wallace shuffled his feet uneasily. This blond companion of his was always showing kinks in his nature, kinks that rarely ever straightened out.

"Yes. And why not? What is she to either you or her mother? Nothing. Affection you have never given her, being unable. It surprises you; but, nevertheless, I love her, and I am going to marry her."

"Really?" said Mrs. Chedsoye.

"Even so."

"You are a fool, Horace!" with rising fury. So then, the child had not jibed her in a moment of pique?

"Men in love generally are fools. I've never spoken before, because you never absolutely needed me till now. There's my cards, pat."

Mrs. Chedsoye's fury deepened, but not visibly. "You are welcome to her, if she will have you."

"Yes," supplemented the major; "if she will have you, my friend, take her, and our benedictions."

Ryanne's shoulders stirred suggestively.

"Of course, I expect to have the final word to say on the subject. She is my daughter," said Mrs. Chedsoye.

"A trifling accident, my dear Gioconda," smiled Ryanne! "merely that."

"Just a little oil, just a little oil," the major pleaded anxiously. "Dash it all, this is no time for a row of this silly order. But it's always the way," irritably. "A big enterprise, demanding a single purpose, and a trifle like this to upset it all!"

"I am ready for business at any moment."

"And you, Kate?"

"We'll say no more about it till the affair is over. After that . . . "

"Those who live will see, eh?" Ryanne rolled a cigarette.

"To business, then. In the first place, Mr. Jones must not reach the Ludwig."

"He will not." Ryanne spoke with quiet assurance.

"He will not even see that boat," added Wallace, glad to hear the sound of his voice again.

"Good. But, mind, no rough work."

"Leave it all to me," said Ryanne. "The United Romance and Adventure Company will give him an adventure on approval, as it were."

"To you, then. The report from New York reads encouragingly. Our friends there are busy. They are merely waiting for us. From now on Percival Algernon must receive no more mail, telegrams or cables."

"I'll take care of that also." Ryanne looked at Mrs. Chedsoye musingly.

"His real estate agent will wire him, possibly tomorrow."

"In that event, he will receive a cable signifying that the transaction is perfectly correct."

"He may also inquire as to what to do with the valuables in the wall-safe."

"He will be instructed to touch nothing, as the people who will occupy the house are old friends." Ryanne smoked calmly.

"Wallace, you will return to New York at once."

"I thought I was wanted here?"

"No longer."

"All right; I'm off. I'll sail on the Prince Ludwig, stateroom 118. I'll have my joke by the way.

"You will do nothing of the kind. You will have a stateroom by yourself," said Mrs. Chedsoye crisply. "And no wine, nor cards. If you fail, I'll break you . . . "

"As we would a churchwarden's pipe, Wallace, my lad." Ryanne gripped his companion by the shoulder, and there was enough pressure in the grip to cause the recipient to wince.

"Well, well; I'll lay a straight course." Wallace slid his shoulder from under Ryanne's hand.

"To you, then, Hoddy, the business of quarantining our friend Percival. Don't hurt him; simply detain him. You must realize the importance of this. Have you your plans?"

"I'll perfect them tomorrow. I shall find a way, never fear."

"Does the rug come in anywhere?" The major was curious. It sometimes seemed to him that Ryanne did not always lay his cards face up upon the table.

"It will play its part. Besides, I am rather inclined to the idea of taking it back. It may be the old wishing-carpet. In that case, it will come in handy. Who knows?"

"How much is it worth?"

"Ah, major, Percival himself could not say exactly. He gave me a thousand pounds for it."

"A thousand pounds!" murmured Wallace.

The major struck his hands lightly together. Whether in applause or wonder he alone knew.

"And it was worth every shilling of it, too. I'll tell you the story some day. There are a dozen ways of supplanting Percival, but I must have something appealing to my artistic side."

"You have never told us your real name, Horace," Mrs. Chedsoye bent toward him.

He laughed. "I must have something to confess to you in the future, dear Gioconda."

"Well, the meeting adjourns, sine die."

"What are you going to do with Fortune?" demanded Ryanne.

"Send her back to Mentone."

"What the deuce did you bring her here for, knowing what was in the wind?"

"She expressed a desire to see Cairo again," answered Mrs. Chedsoye.

"We never deny her anything." The major rose and yawned suggestively.

In the corridor, Ryanne whispered softly: "Why not, Gioconda?"

"She shall never marry a man of your stamp," coldly.

"Charming mother! How tender you have cherished her!"

"Horace," calmly enough, "is it wise to anger me?"

"It may not be wise, but I have never seen you in a rage. You would be magnificent."

"Cease this foolery," patiently. "I am in no mood for it tonight. As associate in this equivocal business you do very well; you are necessary. But do not presume too much upon that. For all that I may not have be what a mother should be, I still have some self-respect. So long as I have any power over her, Fortune shall never marry a man so far down in the social scale as yourself."

"Social scale? Gioconda, how you hurt me!" mockingly. "I should really like to know what your idea of that invincible barrier is. Is it because my face is in the rogues' gallery? Surely, you would not be cruel!"

"She is far above us all, my friend," continuing unruffled. "Sometimes I stand in absolute awe of her."

"A marvel! If my recollection is not at fault, many a man has entered the Villa Fanny, with a view to courtorship, men beside whom I am as Roland to the lowest Saracen. You never objected to them."

"They had money and position."

"Magic talisman! And if I had money and position?"

"My objections would be less strong."

"Your code puzzles me. You would welcome as a son-in-law a man who stole openly the widow's mite, who harass none, but the poor while I, rich, must dwell in the outlandatory injustice!"

"You couldn't take care of her."

"Yes, I could. With but little effort I could make these two hands as honest as the day is long."

"I have my doubts," smiling a little. "Suppose, for the sake of an argument, suppose Fortune accepted me?"

Mrs. Chedsoye's good humor returned. She knew her daughter tolerably well; the child had a horror of men. "Poor Horace! Do you build upon that?"

"Less, perhaps, than upon my own slight invention. My suit, then to be brief, is rejected?"

"Emphatically. I have spoken."

"Oh, well; the feminine prerogative shall be mine, the last word. Good night; dormi bene!" He bowed blandly and turned toward his own room.

He possessed that kind of mockery which was the despair of those at whom it was directed. They never knew whether his mood was one of harmless fun or of deadly intent. And rather than mistake the one quality for the other, they generally pretended to ignore. Mrs. Chedsoye, who had a similar talent, was one of the few who felt along the wall as one does in the dark, instinctively. Tonight she recognized that there was no harmless fun but a real desperateness behind the mask; and she had held in her temper with a firm hand. This was not the hour for a clash. She shivered a little; and for the first time in the six or seven years she had known him, she faced a fear of him. His great strength, his reckless courage, his subtle way of mastering men by appearing to be mastered by them, held her in the thrall of a peculiar fascination which, in quiet periods, she looked upon as something deeper. Marriage was not to her an ideal state, nor was there any man, living or dead, who had appealed to the physical side of her. But he was in the one sex what she was in the other; and while [illegible] never have married him, she raged inwardly at the possibility of his wanting another woman.

To her the social fabric which holds humanity together was merely a convenience; the moral significance touched neither her heart nor her mind. In her the primordial craving for ease, for material comforts, pretty trinkets and gowns was strongest developed. It was as if this sense had been handed down to her, untouched by contact with progression, from the remote ages, that time between the fall of Roman civilization and where modern civilization began. In short a beautiful barbarian, whose intellect alone had advanced.

Fortune was asleep. The mother went over to the bed and gently shook the slim, round arm which lay upon the coverlet. The child's nature lay revealed as she opened her eyes and smiled. It did not matter that the smile instantly changed to a frowning inquiry. The mother spoke truly when she said that there were times when she stood in awe of this, her flesh and blood.

"My child, I wish to ask you a question, and for your own good answer truthfully. Do you love Horace?"

Fortune sat up and rubbed her eyes. "No." Had her wits been less scattered she might have paltered.

The syllable had a finality to it that reassured the mother more than a thousand protestations would have done.

"Good night," she said.

Fortune lay down again and drew the coverlet up to her chin. With her eyes shut she waited, but in vain. Her mother disrobed and sought her own bed.

Ryanne was intensely dissatisfied with himself. For once his desperate mood had carried him too far. He had made too many confessions, had antagonized a woman who was every bit as clever and ingenious as himself. The enterprise toward which they were moving held him simply because it was an exploit that enticed wholly his twisted outlook upon life. There was a forbidding humor in the whole affair, too, which he alone saw. The possible rewards were to him of secondary consideration. It was the fun of the thing. It was the fun of the thing that had put him squarely upon the wide, short road to perdition, which had made him first a spendthrift, then a thief. The fun of the thing; sinister phrase! A thousand times had he longed to go back, for he wasn't all bad; but door after door had shut behind him; and now the single purpose was to get to the end of the road by the shortest route.

He did not deceive himself. His desperate mood was the result of an infernal rage against himself, a rage against the weakness of his heart. Fortune Chedsoye Why had she not crossed his path at that time when he might have been saved? And yet, would she have saved him? God alone knew.

He heard Jones stirring in his room next door. Presently all became still. To sleep like that! He shrugged, threw off his coat, swept the cover from the stand, found a pack of cards, and played solitaire till the first pallor of dawn announced the new day.

Reclining snugly against the parapet, wrapped in his tattered arbiyeth, or cloak, his head pillowed upon his clean arm, motionless with that pretended sleep of the watcher, Mahomed-El-Gebel kept his vigil. Miles upon miles he had come, across three bleak, cold, blinding deserts, on camels, in trains, on camels again, night and day, day and night, across the soundless, yellow plains. Allah was good to the true believer. The night was chill, but certain fires warmed his blood. All day long he had followed the accursed, lying giaour, but never once had he wandered into the native quarters of the city. Patience! What was a day, a week, a year? Grains of sand. He could wait. Inshalla!

CHAPTER VIII.

The Purloined Cable.

George, having made his bargain with conscience relative to the Yhiordes rug, slept the sleep of the untroubled, of the just, of the man who had nothing in particular to get up for. In fact, after having drunk his breakfast cocoa and eaten his buttered toast, he evinced his satisfaction by turning his face away from the attracting morning light and passing off into sleep again. And thereby hangs this tale.

So much depended upon his getting his mail as it came in that morning, that Fate herself must have resisted sturdily the desire to shake him by the shoulder. Perhaps she would have done so but for the serenity of his pose and the infantile smile that lingered for a while round his lips. Fate, as with most of us, has her sentimental lapses.

The man next door, having no conscience to speak of (indeed, he had derailed her while passing his twentieth meridian!) was up betimes. He had turned in at four; at six he was strolling about the deserted lounging-room, watching the entrances. It is inconceivable how easily mail may be purloined in a large hotel. There are as many ways as points to the wind. Ryanne chose the simplest. He waited for the mail-bag to be emptied upon the head-porter's counter. Nonchalantly, but deftly, while the porter looked on, the adventurer ran through the bulk. He found three letters and a cable, the latter having been received by George's bankers the day before and mailed directly to the hotel. The porter had no suspicion that a bold theft was being committed under his very eyes. Moreover, circumstances prevented his ever learning of it. Ryanne stuffed the spoils into a pocket.

"If any one asks for me," he said, "say that I shall be at my banker's, the Anglo-Egyptian bank, at 10 o'clock."

"Yes, sir," replied the porter, as he began to sort the rest of the mail, not forgetting to peruse the postals.

Ryanne went out into the street, walking rapidly into town. Mahomed-El-Gebel shook the folds of his cloak and followed. The adventurer did not slacken his gait till he reached Shepheard's hotel. Upon the steps he paused. Some English troops were marching past, on the way to the railway station; the usual number of natives were patrolling the sidewalks, dangling strings of imitation scarabs; a caravan of pack-camels, laden with cotton, shuffled by haughtily; a blind beggar sat on the curb in front, [illegible] Ryanne, assured that no one he knew was about, proceeded into the writing-room, wholly deserted at this early hour.

He sat down at a desk and opened the cable. It contained exactly what he expected. It was a call for advice in regard to the rental of Mr. George P. A. Jones' mansion in New York and the temporary disposing of the loose valuables. Ryanne read it over a dozen times, with puckered brow, and finally balled it fiercely in his fist. Fool! He could not, at that moment, remember the most essential point in the game, the name and office of the agent to whom he must this very morning send reply. Hurriedly he fished out the letters; one chance in a thousand. He swore, but in relief. In the corner of one of the letters he saw that for some unknown reason the gods were still with him. Reynolds and Reynolds, estates, Broad street; he remembered. He wrote out a reply on a piece of hotel paper, intending to copy it off at the cable-office. This reply covered the ground convincingly. "Renting for two months. Old friends. Leave things as they are. P. A." The initials were a little stroke. From some source Ryanne has picked up the fact that Jones' business correspondence was conducted over those two initials. He tore up the cable into small illegible squares and dropped some into one basket and some into another. Next, he readdressed George's mail to Leipzig; another stroke, meaning a delay of two or three months; from the head office of his banker's there to Paris, Paris to Naples, Naples to New York. That Ryanne did not open these letters was in nowise due to moral suasion; whatever they contained could be of no vital importance to him.

"Now, Horace, we shall bend the crook of our elbow in the bar-room. The reaction warrants a stimulant."

An hour later the whole affair was nicely off his hands The cable had cost him three sovereigns. But what was that? Niente, rien; nothing; a mere bagatelle. For the first time in weeks a sense of security invaded his being.

It was by now 9 o'clock; and Percival Algernon still reposed upon his bed of ease. Let him sleep. Many days were to pass ere he would again know the comfort of linen sheets, the luxury of down under his ear.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Long Record as Public Singer.

What is probably the world's record as a public singer is held by Mrs. George V. Johnson, who for more than 62 years has ben soloist in the Presbyterian church. She has traveled a distance of more than 40,000 miles in merely going to and from her choir rehearsals and church services, while the actual time she has spent in the choir seat would amount to the equivalent of one year and a half.—Phila. (N. Y.) Gazette.