

Parrot & Co.

By Harold MacGrath

Author of "The Carpet From Bagdad," "The Place of Honeymoons," Etc.

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CHAPTER XII.

The Game of Gossip.

During the concluding days of the voyage Elsa had her meals served on deck. She kept Martha with her continually, promenading only early in the morning and at night while the other passengers were at dinner.

Early Wednesday morning she passed Craig and Mallow; but the two had wit enough to step aside for her and to speak only with their eyes. She filled Craig with unadulterated fear. Mallow dragged along the gambler whenever he found a chance to see Elsa at close range.

"There's a woman, Gad! that beach-comber has taste." "I tell you to look out for her," Craig warned again. "I know what I'm talking about."

Mallow whistled. "Oho! You probably acted the fool. Drinking?" Craig nodded affirmatively. "Thought so. Even a Yokohama barmaid will fight shy of a boozier. I'm going to meet her when we get to Singapore, or my name's not Mallow."

Craig laughed with malice. "I hope you will. It will take some of the brag out of you. Say, let's go aft and hunt up the chap. I understand he's taken up quarters in the second cabin."

"Doesn't want to run into me. All right; come on. We'll stir him up a little and have some fun."

They found Warrington up in the stern, sitting on the deck, surrounded by squatting Lascars, some Chinamen and a solitary white man, the chief engineer's assistant. The center of interest was Rajah, who was performing his tricks. Among these was one that the bird rarely could be made to perform, the threading of beads. He despised this act, as it entailed the putting of a blunt needle in his beak. He flung it aside each time Warrington handed it to him.

"That's so, by George! Stupid of me. You came down on the same boat. Fine! You know each other." Elsa straightened her lips with some difficulty. She possessed the enviable faculty of instantly forming in her mind pictures of coming events. The little swelling veins in the colonel's nose were as plain to her mind's eye as if he really stood before her. "Have him take me in to dinner," she suggested.

"No word to Craig, not a glance in his direction. Warrington stopped to the companionway and went below. Craig could not resist grinning at Mallow's discomfiture. "Wouldn't he look oh?" "Shut your mouth! The sneaking dock-walloper, I'll take the starch out of him when we land! Always had that high and mighty air. Wants folks to think he's a gentleman."

"He was once," said Craig. "No use giving you advice; but he's not a healthy individual to bait. I'm no kitten when it comes to scrapping; but I haven't any desire to mix things with him." The fury of the man who had given him the ducking was still vivid. He had been handled as a terrier handles a rat.

"I tell you he's yellow. And with a hundred thousand in his clothes, he'll be yellow still." A hundred thousand. Craig frowned and gazed out to sea. He had forgotten all about the windfall. "Let's go and have a peg," he suggested surlily.

Immediately upon obtaining her rooms at Raffles hotel in Singapore (and leaving Martha there to await the arrival of the luggage, an imposing collection of trunks and boxes and kitbags), Elsa went down to the American consulate, which had its offices in the rear of the hotel. She walked through the outer office and stood silently at the consul general's elbow, waiting for him to look up. She was dressed in white, and in the puggie of her helmet was the one touch of color, Rajah's blue feather. The consul general turned his head. His kindly face had the settled expression of indignant inquiry. The expression changed swiftly into one of delight.

"Elsa Chetwood!" he cried, seizing her hands. "Well, well! I am glad to see you. Good gracious what a beautiful woman you've turned out to be! Sit down, sit down!" He pushed her into a chair. "Well, well! When I saw you last you were nineteen."

"What a frightful memory you have! And I was going to my first ball. You used the same adjective." "Is there a better one? I'll use it if there is. You've arrived just in time. I am giving a little dinner to the consuls and their wives tonight. You see, I've an old friend from India in town today, and I've asked him, too. Your appearance even up matters."

"Oh; then I'm just a filler-in!" "Heavens, no! You're the most important person of the lot, though Colonel Knowlton..." "Colonel Knowlton!" exclaimed Elsa.

"That's so, by George! Stupid of me. You came down on the same boat. Fine! You know each other." Elsa straightened her lips with some difficulty. She possessed the enviable faculty of instantly forming in her mind pictures of coming events. The little swelling veins in the colonel's nose were as plain to her mind's eye as if he really stood before her. "Have him take me in to dinner," she suggested.

"Just what I was thinking of," declared the unsuspecting man. "If anyone can draw out the colonel, it will be you." "I'll do my best." Elsa's mind was full of rollicking malice. Contemplatively he said: "So you've been doing the Orient alone? You are like your father in that way. He was never afraid of anything. Your mental makeup, too, I'll wager is like his. Finest man in the world."

ing out all the dark corners of his soul. He dropped his gaze, confused. Then Elsa calmly turned to the boy. "Come, Chong." There was something in the manner of her exit that infinitely puzzled him. It was the insolence of the well-bred, but he did not know it. To offset his chagrin and confusion, he put on his helmet and passed into the private office. She was out of his range of understanding.

Mallow was an American by birth but had grown up in the Orient, hardily. In his youth he had been beaten and trampled upon, and now that he had become rich in copra (the dried kernels of coconuts from which oil is made), he in his turn beat and trampled. It was the only law he knew. Ordinarily, when in Penang and Singapore, he behaved himself, drank circumspectly and shunned promiscuous companions. But when he did drink heartily, he was a man to be ware of.

He hailed the consul general cordially and offered him one of his really choice cigars, which was accepted. "I say, who was that young woman who just went out?" The consul general laid down the cigar. The question itself was harmless enough; it was Mallow's way of clothing it he resented. "Why?" he asked.

"She's a stunner. Just curious if you know her, that's all. We came down on the same boat. Hanged if I shouldn't like to meet her. Do you know her?" eagerly. "I do. More than that, I have always known her. She is the daughter of the late General Chetwood, one of the greatest civil engineers of our time. When he died he left her several millions. She is a remarkable young woman, a famous beauty, known far and wide in European courts, and I can't begin to tell you how many other accomplishments she has."

"Well, stump me!" returned Mallow. "Is she a free-thinker?" "What the devil is that? What do you mean?" "Only this, if she's all you say she is, why does she pick out an absconder for a friend, a chap who dare not show his pins in the states? I heard the tale from a man once employed in his office back in New York. A beach-comber, a dock-walloper, if there ever was one."

"Mallow, you'll have to explain that instantly." "Hold your horses, my friend. What I'm telling you is on the level. She's been hobnobbing with the fellow all the way down from the Irrawaddy, so I'm told. Never spoke to anyone else. Made him sit at her side at table and jabbered Italian at him, as if she didn't want others to know what she was talking about. I know the man. Fired him from my plantation, when I found out what he was. Can't recall his name just now, but he is known out here as Warrington; Parrot & Co."

The consul general was genuinely shocked. "You can't blame me for thinking things," went on Mallow. "What man wouldn't? Ask her about Warrington. You'll find that I'm telling the truth, all right." "If you are, then she has made one of those mistakes women make when they travel alone. I shall see her at tea and talk to her. But I do not thank you, Mallow, for telling me this. A finer, loyaler-hearted girl doesn't live. She might have been kind out of sympathy."

Mallow bit off the tip of his cigar. "He's a handsome beggar, if you want to know." "I resent that tone. Better drop the subject before I lose my temper. I'll have your papers ready for you in the morning." The consul general caught up his pen savagely to indicate that the interview was at an end. "All right," said Mallow good-naturedly. "I meant no harm. Just naturally curious. Can't blame me." "I'm not blaming you. But it has disturbed me, and I wish to be alone to think it over."

Mallow lounged out, rather pleased with himself. His greatest pleasure in life was in making others uncomfortable. The consul general bit the wooden end of his pen and chewed the splinters of cedar. He couldn't deny that it was like Elsa to pick up some delinquent for her benefactions. Women had no business to travel alone. It was all very well when they toured in parties of eight or ten; but for a charming young woman like Elsa, attended by a splinter companion who doubtless dared not offer advice, it was decidedly wrong. And thereupon he determined that her trip to Yokohama should find her well guarded.

"I beg your pardon," said a pleasant voice. The consul general had been so deeply occupied by his worry that he had not noticed the entrance of the speaker. He turned impatiently. He saw a tall blond man, bearded and tanned, with fine clear blue eyes that met his with the equality of the fearless. (To Be Continued.)

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