



The Carpet from Bagdad

By HAROLD MACGRATH
Author of HEARTS AND MASKS
The MAN ON THE BOX etc.
Illustrations by M.G. KETTNER
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"No. I'll tell you more about it when we get to my room."
"Come on, then," George was now quite willing to discuss rugs and carpets.

Having gained the room, Ryanne threw off his coat and relighted his cigar, which, in a saving mood, he had allowed to go out. He motioned George to be seated.

"Just a little yarn before I show you the rug. See these cuffs?"
"Yes."

"You will observe that I have had to reverse them. Note this collar? Same thing. Trousers-hems a bit frayed, coat shiny at the elbows." Ryanne exhibited his sole fortune. "Four sovereigns between me and a jail."

George became thoughtful. He was generous and kind-hearted among those he knew intimately or slightly, but he had the instinctive reserve of the seasoned traveler in cases like this. He waited.

"The truth is, I'm all but done for. And if I fall to strike a bargain here with you... Well, I should hate to tell you the result. Our consul would have to furnish me passage home. Were you ever up against it to the extent of reversing your cuffs and turning your collars? You don't know what life is, then."

George gravely produced two good cigars and offered one to his host. There was an absence of sound, broken presently by the cheerful crackle of matches; two billowing clouds of smoke floated outward and upward. Ryanne sighed. Here was a cigar one could not purchase in all the length and breadth of the Orient, a Pedro Murias. In one of his doubtfully prosperous epochs he had smoked them daily. How long ago had that been?

"Yonder is a rug, a prayer-rug, as holy to the Moslem as the idol's eye is to the Hindu, as the Bible is to the Christian. For hundreds of years it never saw the outside of the Sultan's palace. One day the late, the recently late, Abdul the Unspeakable Turk, gave it to the Pasha of Bagdad. Whenever this rug makes its appearance in Holy Mecca, it is worshipped, and none but a Sultan or a Sultan's favorite may kneel upon it. Bagdad, the hundred mosques, the old capital of Suleiman the Great, the dreary Tigris and the sluggish Euphrates, a muezzin from the turret calls to prayer, and all that; eh?"

George leaned forward from his chair, a gentle terror in his heart. "The Yhiorides? By Jove! Is that the Yhiorides?"

Admiration kindled in Ryanne's eyes. To have hit the bull's-eye with so free and quick an aim was ample proof that Percival Algernon had not boasted when he said that he knew something about rugs.

"You've guessed it."
"How did you come by it?" George demanded excitedly.

"Why do you ask that?"
"Man, ten-thousand pounds could not purchase that rug, that bit of carpet. Collectors from every port have been after it in vain. And you mean to tell me that it lies there, wrapped in butcher's paper?"

"Right-O!"
Ryanne solemnly detached a cuff and rolled up his sleeve. The bare muscular arm was scarred by two long, ugly knife-wounds, scarcely healed. Next he drew up a trousers-leg, disclosing a battered shin. "And there's another on my shoulder-blade, the closest call I ever had. A man who takes his life in his hands, as I have done, merits some reward. Mr. Jones, I'll be frank with you. I am a kind of derelict. Since I was a boy, I have hated the humdrum of offices, of shops, I wanted to be my own man, to go and come as I pleased. To do this and live meant precarious exploits. This rug represents one of them. I am telling you the family secret; I am showing you the skeleton in the closet, confidentially. I stole that rug; and when I say that the seven labors of our old friend Hercules were simple diversions compared, you'll recognize the difficulties I had to overcome. You know something of the Oriental mind. I handled the job alone. I may not be out of the jungle yet."

George listened entranced. He could readily construct the scenes through which this adventurer had gone; the watchful nights, the untiring patience, the thirst, the hunger, the heat. And yet, he could hardly believe. He was a trifle skeptical. Many a rogue had made the mistake of playing George's age against his experience. He had made some serious blunders in the early stages of the business, however; and everybody, to gain something in the end, must lose something at the start.

"If that rug is the one I have in my mind, you certainly have stolen it. And if it's a copy, I'll tell you quickly enough."

"That's fair. And that's why," Ryanne declared, "I wanted you to look at it. To me, considering what I have gone through to get it, to me it is the genuine carpet. To your expert eye it may be only a fine copy, I know this much, that rare rugs and paintings have many copies, and that some one is being hooked, every day in the week. If this is the real article, I want you to take it off my hands; the adventurer finished pleasantly."

"There will be a hue and cry."
"No doubt of it."
"And the devil's own job to get it out of Egypt." These were set phrases of the expert, preliminaries to bargaining. "One might as well carry round a stolen elephant."

"But a man who is as familiar with the game as you are would have little difficulty. Your integrity is an established fact, on both sides of the water. You could take it to New York as a copy, and no appraiser would know the difference. It's worth the attempt. I'd take it to New York myself, but you see, I am flat broke. Come, what do you or I care about a son-of-a-gun of a Turk?" droily.

"What do you want for it, supposing it's genuine?" George's throat was dry and his voice harsh. His conscience roused herself, feebly, for it had been a long time since occasion had necessitated her presence.

Ryanne narrowed his eyes, carefully balancing the possibilities. "Say, one thousand pounds. It is like giving it away. But when the devil drives, you know. It is beyond any set price; it is worth what any collector is willing to pay for it. I believe I know the kind of man you are, Mr. Jones, and that is why, when I learned you were in Cairo, I came directly to you. You would never sell this rug. No. You would become like a miser over his gold. You would keep it with your emeralds (I have heard about them, too); draw the curtains, lock the doors, whenever you looked at it. Eh? You would love it for its own sake, and not because it is worth so many thousand pounds. You are sailing in a few days; that will help. The Pasha is in Constantinople, and it will be three or four weeks before he hears of the theft, or the cost, with a certain grimness."

"You haven't killed any one?" whispered George.

"I don't know; perhaps. Christianity against paganism; the Occidental conscience permits it." Ryanne made a gesture to indicate that he would submit to whatever moral arraignment Mr. Jones deemed advisable to make.

But George made none. He rose hastily, sought his knife and, without so much as by your leave, slashed the twine, flung aside the paper, and threw the rug across the counterpane. It was the Yhiorides. There was not the slightest doubt in his mind. He had heard it described, he had seen a photograph of it, he knew its history and, most vital of all, he owned a good copy of it.

Against temptation that was robust and energetic and alluring (like the man who insists upon your having a drink when you want it and ought not to have it), what chance had conscience, grown innocuous in the long period of the young man's good behavior? Collectors are always honest before and after that moment arrives when they want something desperately; and George was no more saintly than his kind. And how deep Ryanne and his confederates had delved into human nature, how well they could read and judge it, was made manifest in this moment of George's moral relapse.

Bagdad, the Jnns, Shbad, the Thousand and One Nights, Alibaba and the "Good Night." George passed down the corridor to the adjoining room.

And now, bang! goes Papdora's box.

CHAPTER IV.

An Old Acquaintance.

That faculty which decides on the lawlessness of our actions; so the noted etymologist described conscience. It fell to another distinguished intellect to add that conscience makes cowards of us all. Ay. She may be overcome at times, sidetracked for any special desire that demands a clear way; but she's after us, fast enough, with that battered red lantern of hers, which, brought down from all tongues crisply into our own reads—"Don't do it!" She herself is not wholly without cunning. She rarely stands boldly upon the track to flag us as we come. She realizes that she might be permanently ditched. No; it is far safer to run after us and catch us. Forty Thieves; George was transported mentally to that magic city, standing between the Tigris and the Euphrates, in all its white glory of a

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thousand years gone. Ryanne, the room and its furnishings, all had vanished, all save the exquisite fabric patterned out of wool and cotton and knotted with that mingling love and skill and patience the world knows no more. He let his hand stray over it. How many knees had pressed its thick yet pliant substance? How many strange scenes had it mutely witnessed, scenes of beauty, of terror? It shone under the light like the hide of a healthy hound.

The nerves of a smoker are generally made apparent by the rapidity of his exhalations. These two, in the several minutes, had filled the room with a thick, blue haze; and through this the elder man eyed the younger. The sign of the wolf gleamed in his eyes, but without animosity, modified as it was by the half-friendly, half-cynical smile.

"I'll risk it," said George finally, having stepped off the magical carpet, as it were. "I can't give you a thousand pounds tonight. I can give you three hundred, and the balance tomorrow, between ten and eleven, at Cook's."

"That will be agreeable to me."
George passed over all the available cash he had, rolled up the treasure and tucked it under his arm. That somewhere in the world was a true believer, willing and beating his breast and calling down from Allah curses upon the glaur, the dog of an infidel, who had done this thing, disturbed George not in the least.

"I say," as he opened the door, "you must tell me all about the adventure. It must have been a thriller."
"It was," replied Ryanne. "The story will keep. Later, if you care to hear it."

"Of course," added George, moved by a discretionary thought, "this transaction is just between you and me."
"You may lay odds on that," heartily. "Well, good night. See you at Cook's in the morning."

A disgression, perhaps, but more pertinent an application.
Temptation then no longer at his shoulder, George began to have

Among these quails there was one that pleaded for the desolate Turk or his minions whose carelessness had made the theft possible. For all George cared, the Moslem might grind his forehead in the soulless sand and make the air palpitate with his plaints to Allah. No. The disturbance was due to the fact that never before had been wittingly the purchaser of stolen goods. He never tried to gaze over the subtle distinction between knowing and suspecting; and if he had been variously suspicious in regard to certain past bargains, conscience had found no sizeable wedge for her demurrers. The Yhiorides was confessedly stolen.

He paused, with his hand upon the door-knob of his room if he didn't keep the rug, it would fall into the hands of a collector less scrupulous. To return it to the Pasha at Bagdad would be pure folly, and thankless. It was one of the most beautiful weavings in existence. It was as priceless in its way as any Raphael in the Vatican. And he desired its possession intensely. Why not? Insidious phrase! Was it not better that the world should see and learn what a wonderful craft the making of a rare rug had been, than to allow it to return to the sordid chamber of a harem, to inevitable ruin? As Ryanne said, what the duce was a fanatical Turk or Arab to him?

Against these specious arguments in favor of becoming the adventurer's abettor and accomplice, there was first the possible stain of blood. The man agreed that he had come away from Bagdad in doubt. George did not like the thought of blood. Still, he had collected a hundred emeralds, not one of which was without its red record. Again, if he carried the rug home with his other purchases, he could pull it through the customs only by lying, which was as distasteful to his mind as being a receiver of stolen goods.

He had already paid a goodly sum against the purchase; and it was not likely that a man who was down to reversing his collars and cuffs would

able to supply the factories with a sufficient quantity of fish, and when they secure a good catch try to sell it at very high prices.

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At lunch time the husband took a seat in some fashionable restaurant, and while he was in the midst of his meal his wife would suddenly appear in deep distress. With tears in her eyes she told him that her husband had deserted her, and that she had been left quite without means. Thus appealed to, the diner behaved as if the lady were a distant acquaintance of his. He spoke consoling words to her, and, addressing the other clients of the restaurant, retold her story, and proposed a subscription, heading the list with ten crowns. Most of the diners subscribed for the poor lady, and the couple lived very happily.

A few days ago, however, they came to Vienna and enacted the usual scene at a restaurant, but the sequel was an unexpected one. An elderly American insisted on taking the wife to a lawyer, who would ascertain the whereabouts of her husband, and compel him to support or divorce her. In the latter case he proposed to marry her. The lady tried to protest, but in vain, and the husband, by trying to save the situation, aroused suspicion. The police were called in to protect the lady against her own husband, and at the police station the couple had to disclose their identity, with the result that they exchanged their easy life for prison.

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Bending with Difficulty to Collect a Few Obsolete Pieces of the Bright Paper Confetti that Stuck to the Floor, the Old Sexton Added:
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"Well, I've Got a Rug Up in My Room I'd Like to Show You."

SYNOPSIS.

George Percival Algernon Jones, vice-president of the Metropolitan Oriental 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.

CHAPTER III.—(Continued.)
George's romance gathered itself for a flight. Perhaps it was love thwarted and the gentleman with the mustache and imperial, in spite of his amiability, might be the ogre. Perhaps it was love and duty. Perhaps her lover had gone down to sea. Perhaps (for lovers are known to do such things) he had run away with the other girl. If that was the case, George did not think highly of that tent-ve gentleman's taste. Perhaps and rhaps again; but George might have one on perhapsing till the crack of doom, with never a solitary glimmer of the true state of the girl's mind. Whenever he saw an unknown man or woman who attracted his attention, he never could resist the impulse to invent a romance that might apply.

Immediately after desert the two rose; and George, finding that nothing more important than a pineapple ice detained him, got up and followed. Mr. Ryanne almost trod on his heels as they went through the doorway into the cosy lounging-room. George dropped into a vacant divan and waited for his cafe a la Turque. Mr. Ryanne walked over to the head-porter's bureau and asked if that gentleman would be so kind as to point out Mr. George P. A. Jones, if he were anywhere in sight. He thoughtfully, not to say regretfully, laid down a small bribe.

"Mr. Jones?" The porter knew Mr. Jones very well. He was generous, and treated the servants as though they were really human beings. Mr. Ryanne, either by his inquiry or as the result of his bribe, went up several degrees in the porter's estimation. "Mr. Jones is over there, on the divan by the door."

But Ryanne did not then seek the young man. He studied the quarry from a diplomatic distance. No; there was nothing to indicate that George Percival Algernon Jones was in any way handicapped by his Artreusque middle names.

"No fool, as Giocinda in her infinite wisdom hath said; but romantic, terribly romantic, yet, like the timid bather who puts a foot into the water, finds it cold, and withdraws it. It will all depend upon whether he is a real collector or merely a buyer of rugs. Forward, then, Horace; a sovereign has already dashed headlong down the far horizon." The curse of speaking his thoughts aloud did not, he heavily upon him tonight, for these cogitations were made in silence, unmarked by any facial expression. He proceeded across the room and sat down beside George. "I beg your pardon," he began, "but are you not Mr. Jones?"

Mildly astonished, George signified that he was.

"George P. A. Jones?"
George nodded again, but with some heat in his cheeks. "Yes. What is it?" The girl had just finished her coffee and was going away. Hang this fellow! What did he want at this moment?

If Ryanne saw that he was too much, as the French say, he also perceived the cause. The desire to shake George till his teeth rattled was instantly overcome. She hadn't seen him, and for this he was grateful. "You are interested in rugs? I mean old ones, rare ones, rugs that are bought once and seldom if ever sold again."

"Why, yes. That's my business." George had no silly ideas about trade. He had never posed as a gentleman's son in the sense that it meant idle-

Ryanne presented his card. "How do you pronounce it?" asked George naively.

"As they do in Cork."
"I never saw it spelled that way before."
"Nothing surprising in that," replied Ryanne. "No one else has, either."
George laughed and waited for the explanation.

"You see, Ryan as good a name as they make them; but it classes with prize-fighters, politicians and bar chemists. The two extra letters put the finishing touch to the name. A jewel is all right, but what tells is the way you hang it round your neck. To me, those additional letters represent the jewel Ryan in the hands of a Lalique."

"You talk like an American."
"I am; three generations. What's the matter?" with sudden concern.

George was frowning. "Haven't I met you somewhere before?"
"Not to my recollection." A speculative frown now marred Ryanne's forehead. It did not illustrate a search in his memory for such a casualty as the meeting of George. He never forgot a face and certainly did not remember George's. Rather, the frown had its source in the mild dread that Percival Algernon had seen him somewhere during one of those indispositions of the morning after. "No; I think you have made a mistake."

"Likely enough. It just struck me that you looked something like a chap named Wadsworth, who was half-back on the varsity, when I entered my freshman year."

"A university man? Lord, no! I was turned loose at ten; been hustling ever since." Ryanne spoke easily, not a tremor in his voice, although he had received a slight mental jolt, had no college record here. But I want to chat with you about rugs. I've heard of you, indirectly."

"From the carpet fellows? We do a big business over here. What have you got?"
"Well, I've a rug up in my room I'd like to show you. I want your judgment for one thing. Will you do me the favor?"

Since the girl had disappeared and with her those imaginary appurtenances that had for a space transpired the lounging-room into a stage, George saw again with normal vision the room was simply a common meeting-ground for well-dressed persons and ill-dressed persons, of the unimpeachable, the impeccable, the doubtful and the peccant; for in Cairo, as in ancient Egypt, there is every class and kind of humans, for whom the Decalogue was written, transcribed, and shattered by the turbulent Moses, an incident more or less forgotten these days. From the tall of his eye he gave swift scrutiny to his chance acquaintance, and he found nothing to warrant suspicion. It was nothing to warrant suspicion for men to not an unusual procedure for men to hunt him up in Cairo, in Constantinople, in Smyrna, or in any of the Oriental cities where his business itinerary led him. The house of Mortimer & Jones was widely known. This man Ryanne might have been anywhere between thirty and forty. He was tall, well set, blond and smooth-skinned. True, he appeared to have been ill-fed recently. A little more flesh under the cheek-bones, a touch of color, and the cheek-bones would have been a handsome man. George could read a rug a league off, as they say, but he was a child in the matter of physiognomy, whereas Ryanne was a past-master in this regard; it was necessary both for his business and safety.

"Certainly, I'll take a look at it. But I tell you frankly," went on George, "that to interest me it's got to be a very old one. You see, it's a little fad of mine, outside the business end of it. I'm crazy over real rugs, and I know something about every rare one in existence, or known to exist. Is it a copy?"



Village Crucifix; Typical Sight Throughout Brittany.

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