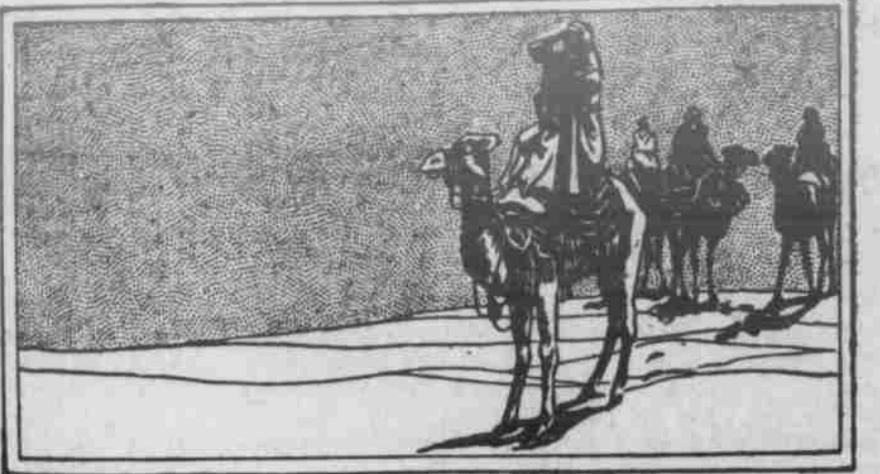




The Carpet from Bagdad

by HAROLD MAC GRATH
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As the Caravan Was Passing She Screamed.

SYNOPSIS.

George Percival Algernon Jones, vice-president of the Metropolitan Oriental Rug Company of New York, thirating 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 Thibet 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 100 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. Ryanne makes known to Mrs. Chedsoye his intention to marry Fortune. Mrs. Chedsoye declares she will not permit it. Plans are laid to prevent Jones sailing for home. Ryanne steals Jones' letters and cable dispatches. His wires agent in New York, in Jones' name, that he is venting home in New York to some friends. Mahomed, keeper of the holy carpet, is on Ryanne's trail. Ryanne promises Fortune that he will see that Jones comes to no harm as a result of his purchase of the rug. Mahomed accuses Ryanne and demands the Thibet rug. Ryanne tells him Jones has the rug and suggests the abduction of the New York merchant as a means of securing its return. The rug disappears from Jones' room. Fortune quarrels with her mother when the latter refuses to explain her mysterious actions. Fortune gets a message purporting to be from Ryanne asking her to meet him in a secluded place that evening. Jones receives a message asking him to meet Ryanne at the English Bar the same evening. Jones is carried off into the desert by Mahomed and his accomplices after a desperate fight. He discovers that Ryanne and Fortune also are captives, the former in badly battered and unconscious. Ryanne recovers consciousness and the sight of Fortune in captivity reveals to him the fact that Mahomed intends to get vengeance on him through the girl. Fortune acknowledges that she stole the rug from Jones' room. She offers to return it to Mahomed if he will free all three of them. Mahomed agrees to liberate Fortune and one of the men in return for the rug. A courier is sent to Cairo for the rug, but returns with the information that Mrs. Chedsoye and her brother have sailed for New York. Fortune spurns offered freedom which does not include her two companions.

CHAPTER XV.—(Continued.)

When camp was made that night it found the captives untalkative. The girl and the two men sat moodily about the fire. Fatigue had dulled their bodies and hopelessness their minds. The men were ragged now, unkempt; a stubble of beard covered their faces, gaunt yet burned. George had lost his remaining pump, and as his stockings were now full of holes, he had, in the last flicker of personal pride, wound about them some cast-off cloths he had found. There was not enough water for ablutions; there was scarcely enough to assuage thirst. By and by, Ryanne, without turning his head, spoke to George. "You say you questioned the courier?" "Yes." "He says he showed the note to no one?" "Yes." "And so no one will try to find us?" "No." Ryanne had asked these questions a dozen times and George had always given the same answers. Up and away at dawn, for they must reach the well that night. It was a terrible day for them all. Even the beasts showed signs of distress. And the worst of it was, Mahomed was

not quite sure of his route. Fortunately, they found the well. They drank like mad people. Ryanne, who had discovered a pack of cards in his pocket, played patience upon a spot smoothed level with his hand. He became absorbed in the game; and the boys gathered round him curiously. Whenever he succeeded in turning out the fifty-two cards, he would smile and rub his hands together. The boys at length considered him unbalanced mentally, and in consequence looked upon him as a near-holy man. Between Fortune and George conversation dwindled down to a query and an answer. "Can I do anything for you?" "No, thanks; I am getting along nicely." To-night she retired early, and George joined Ryanne's audience. "It averages about nine cards to the play," he commented. Ryanne turned over an ace. Ten or fifteen minutes went by. In the several attempts he had failed to score the full complement. George laughed. "What's in your mind?" cried Ryanne peevishly. "If it's anything worth telling, shoot it out, shoot it out!" "I was thinking what I'd do to a club-steak just about now." Ryanne stared beyond the fire. "A club-steak. Grilled mushrooms." "Sauce Bordelaise. Artichokes." "No. Asparagus, vinaigrette." "What's the matter with endives?" "That's so. Well, asparagus with butter-sauce." "Grilled sweets, coffee, Benedictine, and cigars." "And a magnum of 1900 to start off with!" Ryanne, with a sudden change of mood, scooped up the cards and flung them at George's head. "Do you want us both to become gibbering idiots?" George ducked. He and the boys gathered in the fluttering paste-boards. "You're right, Percival," Ryanne admitted humbly. "It will not hurt us to talk out loud, and we are all brooding too much. I am crazy for the want of tobacco. I'd trade the best dinner ever cooked for a decent cigar." George put a hand reluctantly into his pocket. He brought forth, with extreme gentleness, a cigar, the wrapper of which was broken in many places. "I've saved this for days," he said. With his pen-knife he saved it delicately into two parts, and gave one to Ryanne. "You're a good fellow, Jones, and I've turned you a shabby trick. I shan't forget this bit of tobacco." "It's the last we've got. The boys, you know, refuse a pull at the water-pipe; defiles 'em, they say. Funny beggars! And if they gave us tobacco, we shouldn't have paper or pipes." "I always carry a pipe, but I lost it in the shuffle. I never looked upon smoking as a bad habit. I suppose it's because I was never caught before without it. And it is a bad habit, since it knocks up a chap this way for the lack of it. Where do you get your club-steaks in Old N. Y.?" And for an hour or more they solemnly discussed the cooking here and there upon the face of the globe.

By judicious inquiries George ascertained that the trip to Bagdad, barring accidents, would take fully thirty-five days. The daily journeys proceeded uneventfully. Mahomed maintained a taciturn grimace. If he aimed at Ryanne at all, it was in trifling annoyances, such as forgetting to give him his rations unless he asked for them, or walking over the cards spread out upon the sand. Ryanne carried himself very well. Had he been alone, he would have broken loose against Mahomed; but he thought of the others, and restrained himself—some consideration was due them. But into the blood of the two men there crept a petty irritability. They answered one another sharply, and often did not speak. Fortune alone seemed mild and gentle. Mahomed, since that night she had braved him, let her go and come as she pleased, nor once disturbed her. Had she shown weakness when she needed courage, Mahomed might not have altered his plans. Admiration of courage is inherent in all people. So, without appreciating it, that moment had been a precious one, saving them all much unpleasantness. By the twentieth day, the caravan was far into the Arabian desert, and early in the afternoon, they came upon a beautiful oasis, nestling like an emerald in a plaque of gold. So many days had passed since the beloved green of growing things had soothed their inflamed eyes, that the sight of this haven cheered them all mightily. Once under the shade of the palms, the trio picked up heart. Fortune sang a little, George told a funny story, and Ryanne wanted to know if they wouldn't take a hand at euchre. Indeed, that oasis was the turning-point of the crisis. Another week upon the dreary, profitless sands, and their spirits would have gone under completely. This oasis was close to the regular camel-way, there being a larger oasis some twenty-odd miles to the north. But Mahomed felt safe at this distance, and decided to freshen up the caravan by a two-days' rest. George immediately began to show Fortune little attentions. He fixed her saddle-bags, spread out her blanket, brought her some ripe dates of his own picking, insisted upon going to the well and drawing the water she was to drink. And oh! how sweet and cool that water was, after the gritty fluid they had been drinking! Just before sundown, he and Fortune set out upon a voyage of discovery; and Ryanne paused in his game of patience to watch them. There was more self-abnegation than bitterness in his eyes. Why not? If Fortune returned to her mother, sooner or later the thunderbolt would fall. Far better that she should fall in love with Jones than to go back to the overhanging shadow. A smile lifted the corners of his lips, a sad smile. Percival didn't look the part of a hero. His coat was variously split under the arms and across the shoulders; his trousers were ragged, and he walked in his cloth pads like a man who had got out in both feet. A beard covered his face, and the bare spots were blistered and peeling. But there was youth in Percival's eyes and youth in his heart, and surely the youth in hers must some day respond. She would know this young man; she would know that adversity could not crush him; that the promise of safety could not make a coward of him; that he was loyal and brave and honest. She would know in twenty days what it takes the average woman twenty years to learn, the manner of man who professed to love her. Ryanne left the game unfinished, stretched himself upon the ground. Oh, the bitter cup, the bitter cup! Round the fire that night, the camel-boys got out their tom-toms and reeds, and the eerie music affected the white people hauntingly and mysteriously. For thousands of years, the high and low notes of the drums (hollow earthen-jars or large gourds covered with goat-skin at one end) and the thin, metallic wall of the reeds had echoed across the deserts, unchanged. Fortune always remembered that night. Wrapped in her blanket, she had lain down just outside the circle, and had fallen into a doze. When the music stopped and the boys left the prisoners to themselves, George and Ryanne talked. "I never forget faces," began George. "No? That's a gift." "And I have never forgotten yours. I was in doubt at first, but not now." "I never met you till that night at the hotel." "That's true. But you are Horace Wadsworth, all the same, the son of the millionaire-banker, the man I used to admire in the field." "You still think I'm that chap?" "I am sure of it. The first morning you gave yourself away." "What did I say?" anxiously. "You mumbled foot-ball phrases."

"Ah!" Ryanne was vastly relieved. He seemed to be thinking. "Do you persist in denying it?" "I might deny it, but I shan't. I'm Horace Wadsworth, all right. Fortune knows something about that chapter, but not all. Strikes you odd, eh?" continued Ryanne, iron in his voice. "Every opportunity in the world; and yet, here I am. How much do you know, I wonder?" "You took some money from the bank, I think they said." "Right-O! Wine, Percival; cards, wine and other things. Advice and warning went into one ear and out of the other. Always so, eh? You have heard of my brother, I dare say. Well, he wouldn't lend me two stamps were I to write for the undertaker to come and collect my remains. Beautiful history! I've been doing some tall thinking these lonely nights. Only the straight and narrow way pays. Be good, even if you are lonesome. When I get back, if I ever do, it's a new leaf for mine. Neither wine nor cards nor women." Silence. The fire no longer blazed; it glowed. "Who is Mrs. Chedsoye?" George finally began anew. "First, how did you chance to make her acquaintance?" "Some years ago, at Monte Carlo." "And she borrowed a hundred and fifty pounds of you?" "Who told you that?" quickly. "She did. She paid you back." "Yes." "And she hadn't intended to. You poor innocent!" "Why do you call me that?" "To lend money at Monte Carlo to a woman whose name you did not know at the time! Green, green as a paddy field! I'll tell you who she is, because you're bound to learn sooner or later. She is one of the most adroit smugglers of the age; jewels and rare lace. And never once has the secret-service been able to touch her. Her brother, the Major, assists her when he isn't fleecing tender lambs at all known games of chance. He's a card-sharp, one of the best of them. He tried to teach me, but I never could cheat a man at cards. Never makes any false moves, but waits for the quarry to offer itself. That poor child has always been wondering and wondering, but she never succeeded in finding out the truth. Brother and sister have made a handsome living, and many a time I have helped them out. There; you have me in the ring, too. But who cares? The father, so I understand, married Fortune's mother for love; she married him for his money, and he hadn't any. Drink and despair dispatched him quickly enough. She is a remarkable woman, and if she had a heart, she would be the greatest of them all. She has as much heart as this beetle," as he flipped the green iridescent shell into the fire. "But, after all, she's lucky. It's a bad thing to have a heart, Percival, a bad thing. Some one is sure to come along and wring it, to jab it and stab it." "The poor little girl!" "Percival, I'm no fool. I've been watching you. Go in and win her; and God bless you both. She's not for me, she's not for me!" "But what place have I in all this?" "Evasively." "What do you mean by that?" "Why did Mrs. Chedsoye pay me back, when her original intention had been not to pay me?" "You'll find all that written in the book of fate, as Mahomed would say. More, I cannot tell you." "Will not?" "Well, that phrase expresses it." They both heard the sound. Fortune, her face white and drawn, stood immediately behind them.

CHAPTER XVI.

Mahomed Rides Alone.

It was as if the stillness of the desert itself had encompassed the two men. In their ears the sither of the brittle palm-leaves against one another and the crackle of the fire were no longer sounds. They stared at Fortune with that speechless wonder of men who had come unexpectedly upon a wrath. What with the faint glow of the fire upon one side of her and the pallor of moonshine upon the other, she did indeed resemble man's conception of the spiritual. Ryanne was first to pull himself together. "Fortune, I am sorry; God knows I am. I'd have cut out my tongue rather than have hurt you. I thought you were asleep in the tent." "Is it true?" "Yes," Ryanne looked away. "I had not quite expected this: the daughter of a thief." "Oh, come now; don't look at it that way. Smuggling is altogether a different thing," protested Ryanne. (Women were uncertain; here she was, apparently the least agitated of the three.) "Why, hundreds of men and women who regularly go to

church, think nothing of beating Uncle Sam out of a few dollars. Here's Jones, for instance; he would have tried to smuggle in that rug. Isn't that right, Jones?" "Of course!" cried George eagerly, though scarcely knowing what he said. "I'd have done it." "And you wouldn't call Percival a thief," with a forced laugh. "It's like this, Fortune. Uncle Sam wants altogether too much rake-off. He doesn't give us a square deal; and so we even up the matter by trying to beat him. Scruples? Rot!" "It is stealing," with quiet conviction. "It isn't, either. Listen to me. Suppose I purchase a pearl necklace in Rome, and pay five-thousand for it. Uncle Sam will boost up the value more than one-half. And what for? To protect infant industries? Bally rot! We don't make pearls in the States; our oysters aren't educated up to it." His flippancy found no response in her. "Well, suppose I get that necklace through the customs without paying the duty. I make twenty-five hundred or so. And nobody is hurt. That's all your mother does." "It is stealing," she reiterated. How wan she looked! thought George. "How can you make that stealing?" Ryanne was provoked. "The law puts a duty upon such things; if you do not pay it, you steal. Oh, Horace, don't waste your time in specious arguments." She made a gesture, weariness personified. "It is stealing; all the arguments in the world can not change it into anything else. And how about my uncle who fleeces the lambs at cards, and how about my mother who knows and permits it?" Ryanne had no plausible argument to offer against these queries. "Is not my uncle a thief, and is not my mother an abettor? I do not know of anything so vile." Her figure grew less erect. To George's eyes, dimmed by the reflecting misery in hers, she drooped, as a flower exposed to sudden cold. "I think the thief in the night much honestier than one who cheats at cards. A card-sharp; did you not call it that? Don't lie, Horace; it will only make me sad." "I shan't lie any more, Fortune. All that you believe is true; and I would to God that it were otherwise. And

No, I don't believe you have. Some ancestor of your father's has been incarnated in you. You are without vanity and dishonesty; and I have found that these usually go together. Well, at Mentone you had a little experience with men. You were under protection then; protection it was of a sort. If you go out into the world alone, there will be no protection; and you will find that men are wolves generally, and that the sport of the chase is a woman. Must I make it plainer?" "I understand," her chin once more resolute. "I shall become a clerk in a shop. Perhaps I can teach, or become a nurse. Whatever I do, I shall never go back to Mentone. And all men are not bad. You're not all bad yourself, Horace; and so far as I am concerned, I believe I might trust you anywhere." "And God knows you could!" generally. "But I can't help you. If I had a sister or a woman relative, I could send you to her. But I have no one but my brother, and he's a worse scoundrel than I am. I at least work out in the open. He transacts his villainies behind closed doors." George listened, sitting as motionless as a Buddhist idol. Why couldn't he think of something? Why couldn't he come to the aid of the woman he loved in this her hour of trial? A fine lover, forsooth! To sit there like a yokel, stupidly! Could he offer to lend her money? A thousand times, no! And he could not ask her to marry him; it would not have been fair to either. She would have misunderstood; she would have seen not love but pity, and refused him. Neither she nor Ryanne suffered more in spirit than he did at that moment. "Jones, for God's sake, wake up and suggest something! You know lots of decent people. Can't you think of some one?" But for this call George might have continued to grope in darkness. Instantly he saw a way. He jumped to his feet and seized her by the hands, boyishly. "Fortune, Ryanne is right. I've found a way. Mr. Mortimer, the president of my firm, is an old man, kindly and lovable. He and his wife are childless. They'll take you. Why, it's as easy as talking." She leaned back against the drawing of his hands. She was afraid that in his eagerness he was going to take



"She is One of the Most Adroit Smugglers of the Age."

I've been a partner in many of their exploits. But not at cards, Fortune; not at cards. I'm not that kind of a cheat." "Thank you. I should have known some time, and perhaps only half a truth. Now I know all there is to know." She held her hands out before her and studied them. "I shall never go back." "Good Lord! Fortune, you must. You'd be as helpless as a babe. What could you do without money and comfort?" "I can become a clerk in a shop. It will be honest. Bread at Mentone would choke me," and she choked a little then as she spoke. "My dear Fortune," said Ryanne, calling into life that persuasive sweetness which upon occasions he could put into his tones, "have you ever thought how beautiful you are?

her in his arms. She wondered why of a sudden, she had become so weak, not at cards. I'm not that kind of a cheat." "I'll cable the moment we reach port," he said, as if reaching port under the existing conditions was a thing quite possible. "Will you go to them? Why, they will give you every care in the world. And they will love you as . . . as you ought to be loved!" Ryanne turned away his head. Fortune was too deeply absorbed by her misery to note how near George had come to committing himself. "Thank you, Mr. Jones; thank you. I am going to the tent. I am tired. And I am not so brave as you think I am." "But will you?" "I shall tell you when we reach port." And with that she fled to the tent. (TO BE CONTINUED)