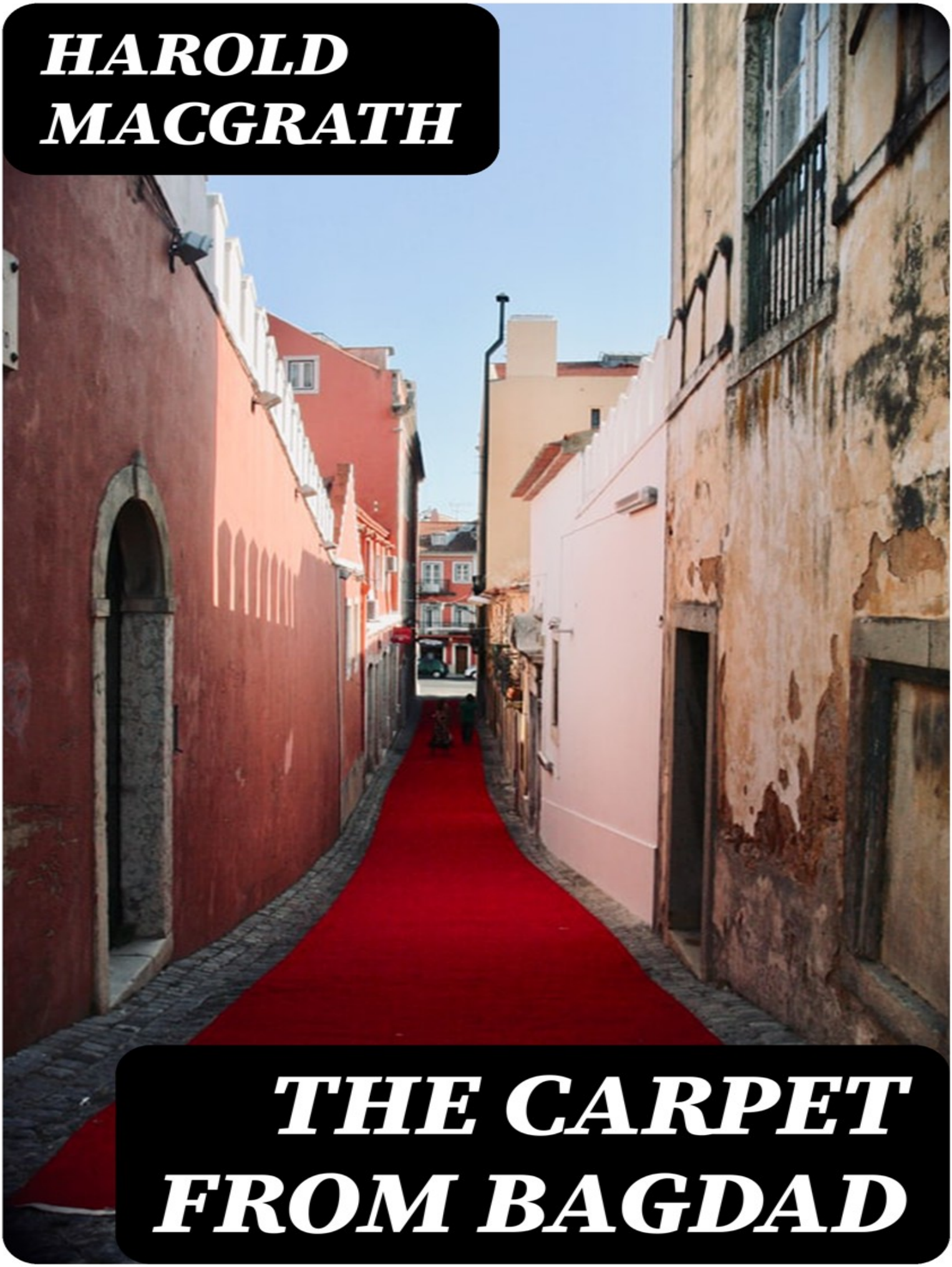
HAROLD MACGRATH



THE CARPET FROM BAGDAD

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Harold MacGrath

The Carpet from Bagdad

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CHAPTER I

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WHAT'S IN A NAME?

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To possess two distinctly alien red corpuscles in one's blood, metaphorically if not in fact, two characters or individualities under one epidermis, is, in most cases, a peculiar disadvantage. One hears of scoundrels and saints striving to consume one another in one body, angels and harpies; but ofttimes, quite the contrary to being a curse, these two warring temperaments become a man's ultimate blessing: as in the case of George P.A. Jones, of Mortimer & Jones, the great metropolitan Oriental rug and carpet company, all of which has a dignified, sonorous sound. George was divided within himself. This he would not have confessed even into the trusted if battered ear of the Egyptian Sphynx. There was, however, no demon-angel sparring for points in George's soul. The difficulty might be set forth in this manner: On one side stood inherent common sense; on the other, a boundless, roseate imagination which was likewise inherent—a kind of quixote imagination of suitable modern pattern. This *alter ego* terrified him whenever it raised its strangely beautiful head and shouldered aside his guardian-angel (for that's what common sense is, argue to what end you will) and pleaded in that luminous rhetoric under the spell of which our old friend Sancho often fell asleep.

P.A., as they called him behind the counters, was but twenty-eight, and if he was vice-president in his late father's shoes he didn't wabble round in them to any great extent. In a crowd he was not noticeable; he didn't stand head and shoulders above his fellow-men, nor would he have been mistaken by near-sighted persons, the myopes, for the Vatican's Apollo in the flesh. He was of medium height, beardless, slender, but tough and wiry and enduring. You may see his prototype on the streets a dozen times the day, and you may also pass him without turning round for a second view. Young men like P.A. must be intimately known to be admired; you did not throw your arm across his neck, first-off. His hair was brown and closely clipped about a head that would have gained the attention of the phrenologist, if not that of the casual passer-by. His bumps, in the phraseology of that science, were good ones. For the rest, he observed the world through a pair of kindly, shy, blue eyes.

Young girls, myopic through ignorance or silliness, seeing nothing beyond what the eyes see, seldom gave him a second inspection; for he did not know how to make himself attractive, and was mortally afraid of the opposite, or opposing, sex. He could bully-rag a sheik out of his camels' saddle-bags, but petticoats and lace parasols and small Oxfords had the same effect upon him that the prodding stick of a small boy has upon a retiring turtle. But many a worldly-wise woman, drawing out with tact and kindness the truly beautiful thoughts of this young man's soul, sadly demanded of fate why a sweet, clean boy like this one had not been sent to her in her youth. You see, the worldly-wise

woman knows that it is invariably the lay-figure and not Prince Charming that a woman marries, and that matrimony is blindman's-buff for grown-ups.

Many of us lay the blame upon our parents. We shift the burden of wondering why we have this fault and lack that grace to the shoulders of our immediate forebears. We go to the office each morning denying that we have any responsibility; we let the boss do the worrying. But George never went prospecting in his soul for any such dross philosophy. He was grateful for having had so beautiful a mother; proud of having had so honest a sire; and if either of them had endued him with false weights he did his best to even up the balance.

The mother had been as romantic as any heroine out of Mrs. Radcliff's novels, while the father had owned to as much romance as one generally finds in a thorough business man, which is practically none at all. The very name itself is a bulwark against the intrusions of romance. One can not lift the imagination to the prospect of picturing a Jones in ruffles and highboots, pinking a varlet in the midriff. It smells of sugar-barrels and cotton-bales, of steamships and railroads, of stolid routine in the office and of placid concern over the daily news under the evening lamp.

Mrs. Jones, lovely, lettered yet not worldly, had dreamed of her boy, bayed and decorated, marrying the most distinguished woman in all Europe, whoever she might be. Mr. Jones had had no dreams at all, and had put the boy to work in the shipping department a little while after the college threshold had been crossed, outward bound. The

mother, while sweet and gentle, had a will, iron under velvet, and when she held out for Percival Algernon and a decent knowledge of modern languages, the old man agreed if, on the other hand, the boy's first name should be George and that he should learn the business from the cellar up. There were several tilts over the matter, but at length a truce was declared. It was agreed that the boy himself ought to have a word to say upon a subject which concerned him more vitally than any one else. So, at the age of fifteen, when he was starting off for preparatory school, he was advised to choose for himself. He was an obedient son, adoring his mother and idolizing his father. He wrote himself down as George Percival Algernon Jones, promised to become a linguist and to learn the rug business from the cellar up. On the face of it, it looked like a big job; it all depended upon the boy.

The first day at school his misery began. He had signed himself as George P.A. Jones, no small diplomacy for a lad; but the two initials, standing up like dismantled pines in the midst of uninteresting landscape, roused the curiosity of his school-mates. Boys are boys the world over, and possess a finesse in cruelty that only the Indian can match; and it did not take them long to unearth the fatal secret. For three years he was Percy Algy, and not only the boys laughed, but the pretty girls sniggered. Many a time he had returned to his dormitory decorated (not in accord with the fond hopes of his mother) with a swollen ear, or a ruddy proboscis, or a green-brown eye. There was a limit, and when they stepped over that, why, he proceeded to the best of his ability to solve the difficulty with his fists. George was no milksop; but

Percival Algernon would have been the Old Man of the Sea on broader shoulders than his. He dimly realized that had he been named George Henry William Jones his sun would have been many diameters larger. There was a splendid quality of pluck under his apparent timidity, and he stuck doggedly to it. He never wrote home and complained. What was good enough for his mother was good enough for him.

It seemed just an ordinary matter of routine for him to pick up French and German verbs. He was far from being brilliant, but he was sensitive and his memory was sound. Since his mother's ambition was to see him an accomplished linguist, he applied himself to the task as if everything in the world depended upon it, just as he knew that when the time came he would apply himself as thoroughly to the question of rugs and carpets.

Under all this filial loyalty ran the pure strain of golden romance, side by side with the lesser metal of practicality. When he began to read the masters he preferred their romances to their novels. He even wrote poetry in secret, and when his mother discovered the fact she cried over the sentimental verses. The father had to be told. He laughed and declared that the boy would some day develop into a good writer of advertisements. This quiet laughter, unburdened as it was with ridicule, was enough to set George's muse a-winging, and she never came back.

After leaving college he was given a modest letter of credit and told to go where he pleased for a whole year. George started out at once in quest of the Holy Grail, and there are more roads to that than there are to Rome. One may be reasonably sure of getting into Rome, whereas the

Holy Grail (diversified, variable, innumerable) is always the exact sum of a bunch of hay hanging before old Dobbin's nose. Nevertheless, George galloped his fancies with loose rein. He haunted the romantic quarters of the globe; he hunted romance, burrowed and plowed for it; and never his spade clanged musically against the hidden treasure, never a forlorn beauty in distress, not so much as chapter one of the Golden Book offered its dazzling first page. George lost some confidence.

Two or three times a woman looked into the young man's mind, and in his guilelessness they effected sundry holes in his letter of credit, but left his soul singularly untouched. The red corpuscle, his father's gift, though it lay dormant, subconsciously erected barriers. He was innocent, but he was no fool. That one year taught him the lesson, rather cheaply, too. If there was any romance in life, it came uninvited, and if courted and sought was as quick on the wing as that erstwhile poesy muse.

The year passed, and while he had not wholly given up the quest, the practical George agreed with the romantic Percival to shelve it indefinitely. He returned to New York with thirty-pounds sterling out of the original thousand, a fact that rejuvenated his paternal parent by some ten years.

"Jane, that boy is all right. Percival Algernon could not kill a boy like that."

"Do you mean to infer that it ever could?" Sometimes a qualm wrinkled her conscience. Her mother's heart told her that her son ought not to be shy and bashful, that it was not in the nature of his blood to suspect ridicule where there was none. Perhaps she had handicapped him with those

names; but it was too late now to admit of this, and useless, since it would not have remedied the evil.

Jones hemmed and hawed for a space. "No," he answered; "but I was afraid he might try to live up to it; and no Percival Algernon who lived up to it could put his nose down to a Shah Abbas and tell how many knots it had to the square inch. I'll start him in on the job to-morrow."

Whereupon the mother sat back dreamily. Now, where was the girl worthy her boy? Monumental question, besetting every mother, from Eve down, Eve, whose trials in this direction must have been heartrending!

George left the cellar in due time, and after that he went up the ladder in bounds, on his own merit, mind you, for his father never stirred a hand to boost him. He took the interest in rugs that turns a buyer into a collector; it became a fascinating pleasure rather than a business. He became invaluable to the house, and acquired some fame as a judge and an appraiser. When the chief-buyer retired George was given the position, with an itinerary that carried him half way round the planet once a year, to Greece, Turkey, Persia, Arabia, and India, the lands of the genii and the bottles, of arabesques, of temples and tombs, of many-colored turbans and flowing robes and distracting tongues. He walked always in a kind of mental enchantment.

The suave and elusive Oriental, with his sharp practices, found his match in this pleasant young man, who knew the history of the very wools and cottons and silks woven in a rug or carpet. So George prospered, became known in strange places, by strange peoples; and saw romance, light of foot and eager of eye, pass and repass; learned that

romance did not essentially mean falling in love or rescuing maidens from burning houses and wrecks; that, on the contrary, true romance was kaleidoscopic, having more brilliant facets than a diamond; and that the man who begins with nothing and ends with something is more wonderful than any excursion recounted by Sinbad or any tale by Scheherazade. But he still hoped that the iridescent goddess would some day touch his shoulder and lead him into that maze of romance so peculiar to his own fancy.

And then into this little world of business and pleasure came death and death again, leaving him alone and with a twisted heart. Riches mattered little, and the sounding title of vice-president still less. It was with a distinct shock that he realized the mother and the father had been with him so long that he had forgotten to make other friends. From one thing to another he turned in hope to soothe the smart, to heal the wound; and after a time he drifted, as all shy, intelligent and imaginative men drift who are friendless, into the silent and intimate comradeship of inanimate things, such as jewels, ivories, old metals, rare woods and ancient embroideries, and perhaps more comforting than all these, good books.

The proper tale of how the aforesaid iridescent goddess jostled (for it scarce may be said that she led) him into a romance lacking neither comedy nor tragedy, now begins with a trifling bit of retrospection. One of those women who were not good and who looked into the clear pool of the boy's mind saw the harmless longing there, and made note, hoping to find profit by her knowledge when the pertinent day arrived. She was a woman so pleasing, so handsome, so

adroit, that many a man, older and wiser than George, found her mesh too strong for him. Her plan matured, suddenly and brilliantly, as projects of men and women of her class and caliber without variation do.

Late one December afternoon (to be precise, 1909), George sat on the tea-veranda of the Hotel Semiramis in Cairo. A book lay idly upon his knees. It was one of those yarns in which something was happening every other minute. As adventures go, George had never had a real one in all his twenty-eight years, and he believed that fate had treated him rather shabbily. He didn't quite appreciate her reserve. No matter how late he wandered through the mysterious bazaars, either here in Egypt or over yonder in India, nothing ever befell more exciting than an argument with a carriage-driver. He never carried small-arms, for he would not have known how to use them. The only deadly things in his hands were bass-rods and tennis-racquets. No, nothing ever happened to him; yet he never met a man in a ship's smoke-room who hadn't run the gamut of thrilling experiences. As George wasn't a liar himself, he believed all he saw and most of what he heard.

Well, here he was, eight-and-twenty, a pocket full of money, a heart full of life, and as hopeless an outlook, so far as romance and adventure were concerned, as an old maid in a New England village. Why couldn't things befall him as they did the chap in this book? He was sure he could behave as well, if not better; for this fellow was too handsome, too brave, too strong, not to be something of an ass once in a while.

"George, you old fool, what's the use?" he thought. "What's the use of a desire that never goes in a straight line, but always round and round in a circle?"

He thrust aside his grievance and surrendered to the never-ending wonder of the Egyptian sunset; the Nile feluccas, riding upon perfect reflections; the date-palms, black and motionless against the translucent blue of the sky; the amethystine prisms of the Pyramids, and the deepening gold of the desert's brim. He loved the Orient, always so new, always so strange, yet ever so old and familiar.

A carriage stopped in front, and his gaze naturally shifted. There is ceaseless attraction in speculating about new-comers in a hotel, what they are, what they do, where they come from, and where they are going. A fine elderly man of fifty got out. In the square set of his shoulders, the flowing white mustache and imperial, there was a suggestion of militarism. He was immediately followed by a young woman of twenty, certainly not over that age. George sighed wistfully. He envied those polo-players and gentleman-riders and bridge-experts who were stopping at the hotel. It wouldn't be an hour after dinner before some one of them found out who she was and spoke to her in that easy style which he concluded must be a gift rather than an accomplishment. You mustn't suppose for a minute that George wasn't well-born and well-bred, simply because his name was Jones. Many a Fitz-Hugh Maurice or Hugh Fitz-Maurice might have been—— But, no matter. He knew instinctively, then, what elegance was when he saw it, and this girl was elegant, in dress, in movement. He rather liked

the pallor of her skin, which hinted that she wasn't one of those athletic girls who bounced in and out of the dining-room, talking loudly and smoking cigarettes and playing bridge for sixpenny points. She was tall. He was sure that her eyes were on the level with his own. The grey veil that drooped from the rim of her simple Leghorn hat to the tip of her nose obscured her eyes, so he could not know that they were large and brown and indefinably sad. They spoke not of a weariness of travel, but of a weariness of the world, more precisely, of the people who inhabited it.

She and her companion passed on into the hotel, and if George's eyes veered again toward the desert over which the stealthy purples of night were creeping, the impulse was mechanical; he saw nothing. In truth, he was desperately lonesome, and he knew, moreover, that he had no business to be. He was young; he could at a pinch tell a joke as well as the next man; and if he had never had what he called an adventure, he had seen many strange and wonderful things and could describe them with that mental afterglow which still lingers over the sunset of our first expressions in poetry. But there was always that hydra-headed monster, for ever getting about his feet, numbing his voice, paralyzing his hands, and never he lopped off a head that another did not instantly grow in its place. Even the sword of Perseus could not have saved him, since one has to get away from an object in order to cut it down.

Had he really ever tried to overcome this monster? Had he not waited for the propitious moment (which you and I know never comes) to throw off this species from Hades? It is all very well, when you are old and dried up, to turn to

ivories and metals and precious stones; but when a fellow's young! You can't shake hands with an ivory replica of the Taj Mahal, nor exchange pleasantries with a Mandarin's ring, nor yet confide joys and ills into a casket of rare emeralds; indeed, they do but emphasize one's loneliness. If only he had had a dog; but one can not carry a dog half way round the world and back, at least not with comfort. What with all these new-fangled quarantine laws, duties, and fussy ships' officers who wouldn't let you keep the animal in your state-room, traveling with a four-footed friend was almost an impossibility. To be sure, women with poodles.... And then, there was the bitter of acid in the knowledge that no one ever came up to him and slapped him on the shoulder with a—"*Hel*-lo, Georgie, old sport; what's the good word?" for the simple fact that his shoulder was always bristling with spikes, born of the fear that some one was making fun of him.

Perchance his mother's spirit, hovering over him this evening, might have been inclined to tears. For they do say that the ghosts of the dear ones are thus employed when we are near to committing some folly, or to exploring some forgotten chamber of Pandora's box, or worse still, when that lady intends emptying the whole contents down upon our unfortunate heads. If so be, they were futile tears; Percival Algernon had accomplished its deadly purpose.

Pandora? Well, then, for the benefit of the children. She was a lady who was an intimate friend of the mythological gods. They liked her appearance so well that they one day gave her a box, casket, chest, or whatever it was, to guard. By some marvelous method, known only of gods, they had

got together all the trials and tribulations of mankind (and some of the joys) and locked them up in this casket It was the Golden Age then, as you may surmise. You recall Eve and the Apple? Well, Pandora was a forecast of Eve; she couldn't keep her eyes off the latch, and at length her hands —Fatal curiosity! Whirr! And everything has been at sixes and at sevens since that time. Pandora is eternally recurring, now here, now there; she is a blonde sometimes, and again she is a brunette; and you may take it from George and me that there is always something left in the casket.

George closed the book and consulted his sailing-list. In a short time he would leave for Port Saïd, thence to Naples, Christmas there, and home in January. Business had been ripping. He would be jolly glad to get home again, to renew his comradeship with his treasures. And, by Jove! there *was* one man who slapped him on the shoulder, and he was no less a person than the genial president of the firm, his father's partner, at present his own. If the old chap had had a daughter now.... And here one comes at last to the bottom of the sack. He had only one definite longing, a healthy human longing, the only longing worth while in all this deep, wide, round old top: to love a woman and by her be loved.

At exactly half after six the gentleman with the reversible cuffs arrived; and George missed his boat.

CHAPTER II

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AN AFFABLE ROGUE

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The carriage containing the gentleman with the reversible cuffs drew up at the side entrance. Instantly the Arab guides surged and eddied round him; but their clamor broke against a composure as effective as granite. The roar was almost directly succeeded by a low gurgle, as of little waves receding. The proposed victim had not spoken a word; to the Arabs it was not necessary; in some manner, subtle and indescribable, they recognized a brother. He carried a long, cylindrical bundle wrapped in heavy paper variously secured by windings of thick twine. His regard for this bundle was one of tender solicitude, for he tucked it under his arm, cumbersome though it was, and waved aside the carriage-porter, who was, however, permitted to carry in the kit-bag.

The manager appeared. When comes he not upon the scene? His quick, calculating eye was not wholly assured. The stranger's homespun was travel-worn and time-worn, and of a cut popular to the season gone the year before. No fat letter of credit here, was the not unreasonable conclusion reached by the manager. Still, with that caution acquired by years of experience, which had culminated in what is known as Swiss diplomacy, he brought into being the accustomed salutatory smile and inquired if the

gentleman had written ahead for reservation, otherwise it would not be possible to accommodate him.

"I telegraphed," crisply.

"The name, if you please?"

"Ryanne; spelled R-y-a double-n e. Have you ever been in County Clare?"

"No, sir." The manager added a question with the uplift of his eyebrows.

"Well," was the enlightening answer, "you pronounce it as they do there."

The manager scanned the little slip of paper in his hand. "Ah, yes; we have reserved a room for you, sir. The French style rather confused me." This was not offered in irony, or sarcasm, or satire; mining in a Swiss brain for the saving grace of humor is about as remunerative as the extraction of gold from sea-water. Nevertheless, the Swiss has the talent of swiftly substracting from a confusion of ideas one point of illumination: there was a quality to the stranger's tone that decided him favorably. It was the voice of a man in the habit of being obeyed; and in these days it was the power of money alone that obtained obedience to any man. Beyond this, the same nebulous cogitation that had subdued the Arabs outside acted likewise upon him. Here was a brother.

"Mail?"

"I will see, sir." The manager summoned a porter. "Room 208."

The porter caught up the somewhat collapsed kit-bag, which had in all evidence received some rough usage in its time, and reached toward the roll. Mr. Ryanne interposed.

"I will see to that, my man," tersely.

"Yes, sir."

"Where is your guest-list?" demanded Mr. Ryanne of the manager.

"The head-porter's bureau, sir. I will see if you have any mail." The manager passed into his own bureau. It was rather difficult to tell whether this man was an American or an Englishman. His accent was western, but his manner was decidedly British. At any rate, that tone and carriage must be bastioned by good English sovereigns, or for once his judgment was at fault.

The porter dashed up-stairs. Mr. Ryanne, his bundle still snug under his arm, sauntered over to the head-porter's bureau and ran his glance up and down the columns of visiting-cards. Once he nodded with approval, and again he smiled, having discovered that which sent a ripple across his sleeping sense of amusement. Major Callahan, room 206; Fortune Chedsoye, 205; George P.A. Jones, 210.

"Hm! the Major smells of County Antrim and the finest whisky in all the isle. Fortune Chedsoye; that is a pleasing name; tinkling brooks, the waving green grasses in the meadows, the kine in the water, the fleeting shadows under the oaks; a pastoral, a bucolic name. To claim Fortune for mine own; a happy thought."

As he uttered these poesy expressions aloud, in a voice low and not unpleasing, for all that it was bantering, the head-porter stared at him with mingling doubt and alarm; and as if to pronounce these emotions mutely for the benefit of the other, he permitted his eyes to open their widest.

"Tut, tut; that's all right, porter. I am cursed with the habit of speaking my inmost thoughts. Some persons are afflicted with insomnia; some fall asleep in church; I think orally. Beastly habit, eh?"

The porter then understood that he was dealing not with a species of mild lunacy, but with that kind of light-hearted cynicism upon which the world (as porters know it) had set its approving seal. In brief, he smiled faintly; and if he had any pleasantry to pass in turn, the approach of the manager, now clothed metaphorically in deferentialism, relegated it to the limbo of things thought but left unsaid.

"Here is a letter for you, Mr. Ryanne. Have you any more luggage?"

"No." Mr. Ryanne smiled. "Shall I pay for my room in advance?"

"Oh, no, sir!" Ten years ago the manager would have blushed at having been so misunderstood. "Your room is 208."

"Will you have a boy show me the way?"

"I shall myself attend to that. If the room is not what you wish it may be exchanged."

"The room is the one I telegraphed for. I am superstitious to a degree. On three boats I have had fine state-rooms numbered 208. Twice the number of my hotel room has been the same. On the last voyage there were 208 passengers, and the captain had made 208 voyages on the Mediterranean."

"Quite a coincident."

"Ah, if roulette could be played with such a certainty."

Mr. Ryanne sighed, hitched up his bundle, which, being heavy, was beginning to wear upon his arm, and signified to the manager to lead the way.

As they vanished round the corner to the lift, the head-porter studied the guest-list. He had looked over it a dozen times that day, but this was the first instance of his being really interested in it. As his chin was freshly shaven he had no stubble to stroke to excite his mental processes; so he fell back, as we say, upon the consoling ends of his abundant mustache. Curious; but all these persons were occupying or about to occupy adjacent rooms. There was truly nothing mysterious about it, save that the stranger had picked out these very names as a target for his banter. Fortune Chedsoye; it was rather an unusual name; but as she had arrived only an hour or so before, he could not distinctly recall her features. And then, there was that word bucolic. He mentally turned it over and over as physically he was wont to do with post-cards left in his care to mail. He could make nothing of the word, except that it smacked of the East Indian plague.

Here he was saved from further cerebral agony by a timely interruption. A man, who was not of bucolic persuasion either in dress or speech, urban from the tips of his bleached fingers to the bulb of his bibulous nose, leaned across the counter and asked if Mr. Horace Ryanne had yet arrived. Yes, he had just arrived; he was even now on his way to his room. The urban gentleman nodded. Then, with a finger slim and well-trimmed, he trailed up and down the guest-list.

"Ha! I see that you have the Duke of What-d'ye-call from Germany here. I'll give you my card. Send it up to Mr. Ryanne. No hurry. I shall be in again after dinner."

He bustled off toward the door. He was pursy, well-fed, and decently dressed, the sort of a man who, when he moved in any direction, created the impression that he had an important engagement somewhere else or was paring minutes from time-tables. For a man in his business it was a clever expedient, deceiving all but those who knew him. He hesitated at the door, however, as if he had changed his mind in the twenty-odd paces it took to reach it. He stared for a long period at the elderly gentleman who was watching the feluccas on the river through the window. The white mustache and imperial stood out in crisp relief against the ruddy sunburn on his face. If he was aware of this scrutiny on the part of the pursy gentleman, he gave not the least sign. The revolving door spun round, sending a puff of outdoor air into the lounging-room. The elderly gentleman then smiled, and applied his thumb and forefinger to the waxen point of his imperial.

In the intervening time Mr. Ryanne entered his room, threw the bundle on the bed, sat down beside it, and read his letter. Shadows and lights moved across his face; frowns that hardened it, smiles that mellowed it. Women hold the trick of writing letters. Do they hate, their thoughts flash and burn from line to line. Do they love, 'tis lettered music. Do they conspire, the breadth of their imagination is without horizon. At best, man can indite only a polite business letter, his love-notes were adjudged long since a maudlin collection

of loose sentences. In this letter Mr. Ryanne found the three parts of life.

"She's a good general; but hang these brimstone efforts of hers. She talks too much of heart. For my part, I prefer to regard it as a mere physical function, a pump, a motor, a power that gives action to the legs, either in coming or in going, more especially in going." He laughed. "Well, hers is the inspiration and hers is the law. And to think that she could plan all this on the spur of the moment, down to the minutest detail! It's a science." He put the letter away, slid out his legs and glared at the dusty tips of his shoes. "The United Romance and Adventure Company, Ltd., of New York, London, and Paris. She has the greatest gift of all, the sense of humor."

He rose and opened his kit-bag doubtfully. He rummaged about in the depths and at last straightened up with a mild oath.

"Not a pair of cuffs in the whole outfit, not a shirt, not a collar. Oh, well, when a man has to leave Bagdad the way I did, over the back fence, so to speak, linen doesn't count."

He drew down his cuffs, detached and reversed them, he turned his folding collar wrong-side out, and used the under side of the foot-rug as a shoe-polisher. It was the ingenius procedure of a man who was used to being out late of nights, who made all things answer all purposes. This rapid and singularly careless toilet completed, he centered his concern upon the more vital matter of finances. He was close to the nadir: four sovereigns, a florin, and a collection of battered coppers that would have tickled the pulse of an amateur numismatist.

"No vintage to-night, my boy; no long, fat Havana, either. A bottle of stout and a few rags of plug-cut; that's the pace we'll travel this evening. The United Romance and Adventure Company is not listed at present. If it was, I'd sell a few shares on my own hook. The kind Lord knows that I've stock enough and to spare." He laughed again, but without the leaven of humor. "When the fool-killer snatches up the last fool, let rogues look to themselves; and fools are getting scarcer every day.

"Percival Algernon! O age of poets! I wonder, does he wear high collars and spats, or has she plumbed him accurately? She is generally right. But a man changes some in seven years. I'm an authority when it comes to that. Look what's happened to me in seven years! First, Horace, we shall dine, then we'll smoke our pipe in the billiard-room, then we'll softly approach Percival Algernon and introduce him to Sinbad. This independent excursion to Bagdad was a stroke on my part; it will work into the general plan as smoothly as if it had been grooved for the part. Sinbad. I might just as well have assumed that name: Horace Sinbad, sounds well and looks well." He mused in silence, his hand gently rubbing his chin; for he did possess the trick of talking aloud, in a low monotone, a habit acquired during periods of loneliness, when the sound of his own voice had succeeded in steadying his tottering mind.

What a woman, what a wife, she would have been to the right man! Odd thing, a man can do almost anything but direct his affections; they must be drawn. She was not for him; nay, not even on a desert isle. Doubtless he was a fool. In time she would have made him a rich man. Alack! It was

always the one we pursued that we loved and never the one that pursued us.

"I'm afraid of her; and there you are. There isn't a man living who has gone back of that Mona Lisa smile of hers. If she was the last woman and I was the last man, I don't say." He hunted for a cigarette, but failed to find one. "Almost at the bottom, boy; the winter of our discontent, and no sun of York to make it glorious. Twenty-four hundred at cards, and to lose it like a tyro! Wallace has taught me all he knows, but I'm a booby. Twenty-four hundred, firm's money. It's a failing of mine, the firm's money. But, damn it all, I can't cheat a man at cards; I'd rather cut his throat."

He found his pipe, and a careful search of the corners of his coat-pockets revealed a meager pipeful of tobacco. He picked out the little balls of wool, the ground-coffee, the cloves, and pushed the charge home into the crusted bowl of his briar.

"To the devil with economy! A pint of burgundy and a perfecto if they hale us to jail for it. I'm dead tired. I've seen three corners in hell in the past two months. I'm going as far as four sovereigns will take me.... Fortune Chedsoye." His blue eyes became less hard and his mouth less defiant. "I repeat, the heart should be nothing but a pump. Otherwise it gets in the way, becomes an obstruction, a bottomless pit. Will-power, that's the ticket. I can face a lion without an extra beat, I can face the various countenances of death without an additional flutter; and yet, here's a girl who, when I see her or think of her, sends the pulse soaring from seventy-seven up to eighty-four. Bad business; besides, it's so infernally unfashionable. It's hard work for a man to keep

his balance 'twixt the devil and the deep, blue sea; Gioconda on one side and Fortune on the other. Gioconda throws open windows and doors at my approach; but Fortune locks and bars hers, nor knocks at mine. That's the way it always goes.

"If a man could only go back ten years and take a new start. Ass!" balling his fist at the reflection in the mirror. "Snivel and whine over the bed of your own making. You had your opportunity, but you listened to the popping of champagne-corks, the mutter of cards, the inane drivel of chorus-ladies. You had a decent college record, too. Bah! What a guileless fool you were! You ran on, didn't you, till you found your neck in the loop at the end of the rope? And perhaps that soft-footed, estimable brother of yours didn't yank it taut as a hangman's? You heard the codicil; into one ear and out the other. Even then you had your chance; patience for two short years, and a million. No, a thousand times no. You knew what you were about, empty-headed fool! And to-day, two pennies for a dead man's eyes."

He dropped his fist dejectedly. Where had the first step begun? And where would be the last? In some drab corner, possibly; drink, morphine, or starvation; he'd never have the courage to finish it with a bullet. He was terribly bitter. Everything worth while seemed to have slipped through his fingers, his pleasure-loving fingers.

"Come, come, Horace; buck up. Still the ruby kindles in the vine. No turning back now. We'll go on till we come bang! against the wall. There may be some good bouts between here and there. I wonder what Gioconda would say if she knew why I was so eager for this game?"