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A PALMIST'S WEIRD

(Continued from Page One.)

business man in barracks, my husband says. "You are a loyal friend to our youngsters, Mrs. Bridges, but he need not be a miracle to be the best business man in barracks, need he? Do you think he looks quite sane?"

"Sane enough for an Englishman and a Sapper anyway," she retorted, and the Colonel joined good-naturedly in the laugh against himself.

At that moment a very martial gentleman strode across the grass towards the pair, saluting the lady with mock devotion and hailing her in loud and cheery tones.

"Ah, Miss Verturne, you are like all the girls. You spoil these young Don't-cher-knows from the Old Country and forget that you belong to us. We have been looking for you all afternoon."

"We can't all belong to you, Colonel Perkins. The law forbids. Where ladies are concerned, there is no law for soldiers," and his chest expanded until his braces creaked.

"I thought that the army was invented to support the law."

"Quite wrong, my dear, I assure you. To support the ladies. Your education has been neglected; let me improve it. Antrobous has had his turn."

The girl flushed to the tips of her delicate ears, and the vertical lines between her companion's eyes became furrows, whilst the eyes themselves contracted and flashed savagely.

"Does he look sane now?" whispered Colonel Mansfield to Mrs. Bridges.

"Miss Verturne has done me the honor to ask me to take her to her father, sir. We will go to her father's home and talk to you instead of Miss Verturne if she will allow me."

"You! Oh, no one wants to talk to you; at least, I don't want there are so many pretty girls about," replied the unsuspicious militia man. "Keep a dance for your most devoted tonight, Miss Verturne," and he strutted gaily away, that splendid political organ, his voice soon making itself heard as the dominant note in the chorus on the lawn.

"What a brute that fellow is," growled Antrobous, as he led his companion round a buttress and upon the broad walk looking seaward.

"The world is full of such, Harry. He means no harm. What did you mean to say to him if he had accepted your invitation?"

"Just enough to teach him manners. It would have been a long interview, but, Harry, how do you think we are going to get through life, if you try to teach every one manners who ventures to look at me? I am afraid I have promised to marry a freetrader."

"Sorry already, little woman?"

She paused and looked at him, and as she did so her laughing eyes grew grave. It was almost possible with such a man to quarrel over the first kiss.

"But the wretchedness in her eyes melted him. It was too soon even for him. "Ah, forgive me, Francis! The Antrobous temper is a devil which won't be exorcised, but that Sarg's look was almost a delirium. My fingers itched to meet in his hair. But I will be good if you forgive me."

"There is nothing to forgive," she said softly, putting her hand in his sleeve. "But I am a little afraid of your tiger, you know. He must not show his claws for my sake," and so, laughing again, the two came in sight of a group of older people gathered round a bright hand naviol.

"There's my father taking their Exerciences to the palmist. What can Lord X want to consult her for? There is only India left for him, and the Colonel will tell him his character for five cents."

"She may not agree with the Colonel."

"His nearest does with any one, and she is awfully rude sometimes."

"Was she rude to you?"

"Not rude, but she wasn't kind."

"Then you have been to her. Tell me."

"No, I will not, sir. You may find out my faults for yourself or stay—I will make a bargain. Go and have your hand read, and the will 'sag yams' as the Americans say. Will you?"

"Isn't it rather feeble?"

"I want you to. Won't you?"

"If my lady wishes it."

"Your lady does, and wishes you bonne fortune, and with a dainty assumption of dignity she swept him by a curtsy and went to play her parlor tricks as she called them to her Exercices."

On a patch of mountain grass, amongst rocks as Nature clad them in golden stonework, another man, in a gleam of astatine white, and with the staid coloring of the buffalo hunters of the plains.

As soon as he could gain admission, Antrobous entered.

Through the coloring of the tent the strong afternoon sun barely made way, so that he found himself in a dim rich light, face to face with a curious type of beauty.

She was beautiful, that was beyond denial, but her beauty was the hard aquiline beauty of the Cree, though she was as white as the snow, and the rich autumnal coloring on her cheeks which perhaps the effect of the light in which she sat.

At any rate no one could have become her hole on her fantastic garb better than she did.

Of course Antrobous had met her before, but she put a stop at once to his eulogies. She was the seer now and would play no other part but her own.

"You don't believe in palmistry, Mr. Antrobous?"

"Is that written in my hand?"

"No, but many other things are with astonishing distinctness, and some of them not in harmony with the disbelief you profess. For instance, you are extremely superstitious as your people were."

Antrobous colored uneasily. What did this woman know of his people?

"And yet they must have had courage since some of them faced what they feared before they were obliged to."

The man's face went white with rage, and she saw it, but instead of showing any sign of fear, a gleam of malice came into her eyes, and she said coldly: "If you are a man, you will not go on, Mr. Antrobous, but you cannot expect her to be a man, and you cannot expect her to be."

"Continue, if you please, by all means but it was my fortune you were to tell, was it not?"

"Certainly, and there is plenty to tell, and the first of it is plainly written, passed. It grows confused, it breaks here and begins again. Yes! It is the same woman and you will marry her and—"

She looked up at him, and shrank

from him, her whole expression for a moment one of honest horror, but the next moment she laughed, though the laugh rang thin and false.

"What nonsense it is. Forgive me, Mr. Antrobous, for playing my role too far. You know, and you tempted me too far. But of course you are right. The whole thing is a farce."

But now the man's face was set and earnest.

"Oblige me by telling me what you think you see written. It is a pity to stop now."

"Not a bit, but you do. You said I should marry and—"

Her eyes fastened on his and seemed to look into his soul, and slowly her cheeks blanched and the look of horror came back to her, as sinking into her seat, she buried her face on her arms and whispered with a shudder which was at least well simulated.

"Murder her!"

CHAPTER II.

"What a devil!"

Antrobous was standing looking westward, where the crimson orange of the sun was fading slowly into the purple gloom of the sea, which wrapped the mountain's feet and the sadness of the hour was added to the memory of the woman's words.

"No one but a devil could have blasphemed as she did and yet—how did she know about the things at Red Tower and about my father?"

Ever in thought Antrobous never allowed that had fallen upon the family at Red Tower seven years ago had left him with a haunting sense of foreboding to tell upon their neighbors.

Of the late squire of Red Tower no one spoke, and if any thought of him it was as much as possible as the father of that early child. Men tried to forget that he had written the "Finis" to his own story.

And this woman after seven years had been the first to set Harry's strange nerves tingling again, to stir the half-dormant memories and rosin again half-conquered fears, by a shot at a venture. Was it only that? That there were soon making itself heard as the dominant note in the chorus on the lawn.

"There was that Miss Brown, whose immediate death she had predicted—she died, and the other for whom she foretold insanity, was in an asylum. For him she had predicted—"

"Damn the woman; she ought to be strangled!" In his mental agony he spoke aloud, and his fingers clenched as he himself were the executioner and had her by the throat.

"Good Lord, is she as bad as that? Who is it, Mephistopheles? At the present moment you look cast for the part of a demon."

Egerton's chin on the station, had come out to him from the officers' quarters and his footfall had been deadened by the excellence of the lawn.

"You here, Egge. I was missing on woman, the mischief maker. Forgive my heat."

"Not the one woman, already, I hope."

"No; that Miss Despard, the palmist. You know she prophesied the death of that poor little Brown girl within the year, and she was right."

"But you should give up the contemplation of crime, old fellow. Just wrath is not wholesome for you," and as his eyes rested upon his friend's white and working features his look was more serious than his words.

"Come in and have a pipe whilst I tell you about the arrangements we have been making for the great day. The women are all mad because those ELLY girls won't carry red and white banners. They insist on wearing some rotten colored frocks which you go with out of the window. The C. O. wife would think that their pig-headedness would break off the match."

Thus Egerton, who had loyally smoothed his own hopes in well-acted gladness over his friend's good luck, had Antrobous from his evil mood and was to him as the son of Jesse to Israel's mad king.

When Antrobous stepped in, soothed with tobacco and more than one whiskey and soda, and tried by the bout of squash raquets he had played before dinner, his mind was as blank as an animal's and he dropped into oblivion as soon as his head touched his pillow.

And yet towards the deep of the night he had left his quiet bed, and lived a whole life in a flash, which his body had as yet no knowledge of. In himself standing at the supreme moment, alone, in another bed-chamber, the details of which were unfamiliar to him.

In a mirror opposite to him he could see his own face, rigid with fear and the face of Medusa, the brows furrowed, the eyes wild with the madness of despair. What had happened to him he did not know, but he knew that the weight of a lost world was on his shoulders, and knew that the sweetness of life had dropped from him for ever, and that the methemorphosis of the shameful end which one short minute before need never have been. And still he did not understand.

That was a thing out of the world, beyond hope, doomed, he knew, that had done this himself he knew, and that effort and prayer were alike vain, he felt, but there was a misery beyond this, and turning slowly towards the centre of the room he saw his own handwork.

From vague shadows and dim colorings he picked out the outline of a bed and its drapery, and of that thing of alabaster whiteness which lay so strangely inert upon it.

Gradually the features seemed to grow out of the gloom. An arm trailed helplessly from the bedside, the palm of the soft hand upturned, the little fingers limp and helpless. But that which held his eyes was the royal head with its natural crown of gold, the face thrown back until only the tip of the nose and the mouth were visible to him, and above all the full exquisite white throat and bosom, down which ran a stream of crimson so vivid that it blinded him like a lightning flash.

Just above the source of that vivid stream, where the outline of the collar bone was suggested through the flesh, was a small dark mole, emphasized by the white whiteness of the surroundings, and this trifle held him, as trifles do in dreams.

He could not see the face; he did not see the hand; he recognized the woman though there was a hint in the delicate outlines which almost brought a name which he could not remember, to his lips. He felt the whiteness of the surrounding, and then something snapped in his brain, he sank beneath the weight which was upon him, and yoked himself to the bed.

Until morning he sat on his bedside smoking and thinking, and his waking thoughts were almost as wild as his dreams.

He put those down sanely enough to the effect upon his mind of the scene in the topee, and scoffed at himself for his weak mindedness in allowing

such folly to weigh with him. His northern common sense warned against the superstition which is also northern, but in the still hours before dawn, nature will be heard, and nature is not always a reliable ally to what we call common sense.

He knew the volcanic temper of his race, he realized the hideous possibility of undoing with one moment of frenzy might accomplish, and with one face white and worn with his nights watching looked back at him as he shaved, hideously like the face he had seen in his dream.

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The first sight of her on this night came to him as a shock. That she was beautiful he knew, but how beautiful it seemed to him now. He recognized the exquisite fairness of her skin, nor seen so superb a throat except in dreams. There was no doubt now as to the personality of the woman who lay upon the bed, except all her hair that God for it; that, search as he would, there was no blemish however tiny, to emphasize the ivory whiteness of her bosom.

"Why Harry, you look as if you had seen a ghost."

"A spirit, dear," he whispered. "Forgive me, even the prophets became dumb in the presence of angels."

As the pure sunlight banished malaria, Francis's gentle beauty drove away whatever remained to him of the young soldier's dream, so that the evening passed like a song which ceases before the ear is satisfied with its sweetness.

Only the old Governor and the two young people were left by eleven in the broad verandah which the white moonlight lit with silvery brilliance, and he was dreaming over his cigar whilst they whispered the night away. At last the Governor shifted uneasily, and coughed.

"Ah, father, how selfish we are. He is keeping up his mind of me, and coming behind him, she put both her arms round his neck, and nesting her head on his shoulder.

"I don't want to sleep every day," he said. "I am a man, Egge, and come for a walk in the park. I hate dreaming; I said sleep."

"I didn't say sleep; I said dream."

"Never, I never sleep. I always dream. Come."

When the walk was over, the two breakfasted together in Egerton's room. The breakfast was finished, Egerton left his friend for half an hour, and returned in the morning paper. When he returned, Antrobous was fast asleep where he sat, his friend took up the paper and sat reading opposite to him. But the restlessness of the sleeper distracted Egerton's attention. The man kept moaning in his sleep, and the noise which he made by his chair's side tickled and annoyed him, and he clenched his teeth and worked convulsively.

Egerton rose to wake him, but before he could do so, Antrobous opened his eyes and looked round him with an expression of the wildest horror. Then he said again in his chair muttering: "Only a dream again, only a dream again."

"What is it, old man? The lobster said gone wrong?"

"At a moment the older man looked at him with a look of intense interest, and he said, then he pulled himself together and answered:

"I suppose so, I was a damned fool to go to sleep."

"You can't stay awake always."

"I suppose that is impossible, but I try to. Have you got your painting yet, Harry?"

"Going to kill time in that way?"

"Yes. Give me a sketch. Thank you."

For ten minutes Antrobous worked hard, and in silence, painting apparently from memory.

When he had finished, he handed his work to Egerton. It fairly took that gentleman's breath away.

"Where will you break out next, Harry? I did not know you could even paint, and behold it was the work of genius. Is this a design for the 'nest'?"

"God forbid! Did you ever see a design like this in London, or anywhere else? It is original all right, if you have not cribbed it from some Japanese shop. Meant for a wall paper, I suppose. The coloring is superb, though I prefer rose buds and such like myself. Where did you get it from?"

"Hell, I think," replied the other, and he threw his sketch into the waste paper basket.

"Now come and take me to Francis. I am allowed one more visit before I marry."

The proposal chimed in with Egerton's desires. The events of the last few hours made him a little nervous about his charge, but long before their visit to Francis was over, his friend's manner had reassured him. He might be harassed and eccentric, but Antrobous had no idea of bolting again.

"I will be quiet, and the master of ceremonies left his principles to discuss final details.

"If you think that journey won't be a hardship, I will go with you to expect us tomorrow night. It might be better to break the journey at Taunton."

"I would think that I had never journeyed to Africa, Harry. You are going to be too careful of me."

"It is for such a short time, Francis, that I cannot afford to take any risks. I have thrown away eight years already."

"It is not only for this life," Francis said. "It is for the life to come. It is a thing beyond? Really believe? I know it," and her great eyes grew deep with the faith that was in her. But his face grew troubled. "I would

rather only believe in the tangible, the commonplace, the life we know," he said. "I would not expect to see you a life as she leads."

"And you, did you ask her anything?"

"Thought it was the last question he always expected. I knew at once what his senior meant."

"No, it would have been useless. It never would have been any good to ask him about the level strip of those strong hands relaxed upon the chair handles and Antrobous looked up. He had sat since the first mention of Francis's name like one who braces himself against the surgeon's knife. Now he held out his hand to his old friend.

"Thanks, Egge," he said, but the old name and the old manner wiped out the past, and when Egerton went back to his tent he had regained a friend.

But that friend sat where Egerton had left him, hour after hour, motionless and silent, his hands locked, his eyes bent down, reading some riddle in the sand, or fighting some silent battle in his heart. Then when dawn came, he rose and passed swiftly to Colonel's tent at the flats.

An hour later he was galloping to the hospital at G and a week later Egerton was told that Major Antrobous was going home.

"Why?"

"No one knows. Sent home, some say."

"Invalided?" incredulously.

"Quite sane? It's a pity, though, this show is nearly over. It would have been better for him if he had seen it. Would it? Egerton wondered. When his friend asked that little woman who nursed you, Egge, is going by the same way as you are, and he said, 'He was sure that the best thing possible had happened for both his friends.'

For the second time in his life, Antrobous found himself on the verge of matrimony, but though the woman was his first love, all had changed, changed even more than it need have done, if he deferred to the will of the groom that they should be married in London, away from every one who had known them in their earlier life, except Egerton, who was to act as master of the ceremonies.

Between his teeth that gentleman swore that he would bring his horse to the scratch this time.

But he had no fears for Antrobous. If he had once been a somewhat uncertain quantity, he was now a sobered man whose resolution and methodical way of doing things was a guarantee that he would be true to his word. In town Antrobous took charge of almost all the details himself, and even went so far as to choose and hire the carriage and the horses in which he and his bride were to pass the winter.

"They had seen enough," he said, "of the lonely valley. Now he wanted to be a man of the human life."

One thing only he had left to do, and that was to keep her amused, not for any other reason. She was to seek their nest, and it pleased him to see her so happy. He had seen her in the days of her first and Liberty's show rooms.

The marriage had been fixed for the third and on the night of the first Egerton's dinner in his rooms, at which the general fact that Antrobous was in the wildest spirits, so wild indeed, that the white dawn had crept across his blinds, before the last of their guests had departed.

To Egerton it seemed as if Antrobous was afraid to let them go, and it was never more than a suspicion that he heard his friend's anxious muttering that it would be wise to smother a beauty sleep.

"A man doesn't want to sleep every day," he said. "I am a man, Egge, and come for a walk in the park. I hate dreaming; I said sleep."

"I didn't say sleep; I said dream."

"Never, I never sleep. I always dream. Come."

When the walk was over, the two breakfasted together in Egerton's room. The breakfast was finished, Egerton left his friend for half an hour, and returned in the morning paper. When he returned, Antrobous was fast asleep where he sat, his friend took up the paper and sat reading opposite to him. But the restlessness of the sleeper distracted Egerton's attention. The man kept moaning in his sleep, and the noise which he made by his chair's side tickled and annoyed him, and he clenched his teeth and worked convulsively.

CHAPTER III.

"I met an old friend of ours in hospital, Major."

"Indeed! He must have been a very old friend. We have seen little of the same people since '85, Egerton."

The first speaker set his eyes upon the other and made no reply.

"I remember him, but he was hardly years he had harbored a grudge against his companion, for a wrong done to Francis Verturne, and in spite of the world's talk, he had not let it go. He had a complaint from her, no defence from him. For this reason the two men had as far as possible quietly avoided meeting. Now that they had met beyond this, and turning slowly towards the centre of the room he saw his own handwork.

From vague shadows and dim colorings he picked out the outline of a bed and its drapery, and of that thing of alabaster whiteness which lay so strangely inert upon it.

Gradually the features seemed to grow out of the gloom. An arm trailed helplessly from the bedside, the palm of the soft hand upturned, the little fingers limp and helpless. But that which held his eyes was the royal head with its natural crown of gold, the face thrown back until only the tip of the nose and the mouth were visible to him, and above all the full exquisite white throat and bosom, down which ran a stream of crimson so vivid that it blinded him like a lightning flash.

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Until morning he sat on his bedside smoking and thinking, and his waking thoughts were almost as wild as his dreams.

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such folly to weigh with him. His northern common sense warned against the superstition which is also northern, but in the still hours before dawn, nature will be heard, and nature is not always a reliable ally to what we call common sense.

He knew the volcanic temper of his race, he realized the hideous possibility of undoing with one moment of frenzy might accomplish, and with one face white and worn with his nights watching looked back at him as he shaved, hideously like the face he had seen in his dream.

At one moment he decided that such as he had no right to marry; that he would bring misery to the woman he loved; that the palmist's prophecy was a true warning which it was his duty to heed, and the next he laughed at himself as a fool almost frightened away from the woman he loved, just as that poor little Miss Brown had been frightened out of her life.

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Only the old Governor and the two young people were left by eleven in the broad verandah which the white moonlight lit with silvery brilliance, and he was dreaming over his cigar whilst they whispered the night away. At last the Governor shifted uneasily, and coughed.

"Ah, father, how selfish we are. He is keeping up his mind of me, and coming behind him, she put both her arms round his neck, and nesting her head on his shoulder.

"I don't want to sleep every day," he said. "I am a man, Egge, and come for a walk in the park. I hate dreaming; I said sleep."

"I didn't say sleep; I said dream."

"Never, I never sleep. I always dream. Come."

When the walk was over, the two breakfasted together in Egerton's room. The breakfast was finished, Egerton left his friend for half an hour, and returned in the morning paper. When he returned, Antrobous was fast asleep where he sat, his friend took up the paper and sat reading opposite to him. But the restlessness of the sleeper distracted Egerton's attention. The man kept moaning in his sleep, and the noise which he made by his chair's side tickled and annoyed him, and he clenched his teeth and worked convulsively.

CHAPTER III.

"I met an old friend of ours in hospital, Major."

"Indeed! He must have been a very old friend. We have seen little of the same people since '85, Egerton."

The first speaker set his eyes upon the other and made no reply.

"I remember him, but he was hardly years he had harbored a grudge against his companion, for a wrong done to Francis Verturne, and in spite of the world's talk, he had not let it go. He had a complaint from her, no defence from him. For this reason the two men had as far as possible quietly avoided meeting. Now that they had met beyond this, and turning slowly towards the centre of the room he saw his own handwork.

From vague shadows and dim colorings he picked out the outline of a bed and its drapery, and of that thing of alabaster whiteness which lay so strangely inert upon it.

Gradually the features seemed to grow out of the gloom. An arm trailed helplessly from the bedside, the palm of the soft hand upturned, the little fingers limp and helpless. But that which held his eyes was the royal head with its natural crown of gold, the face thrown back until only the tip of the nose and the mouth were visible to him, and above all the full exquisite white throat and bosom, down which ran a stream of crimson so vivid that it blinded him like a lightning flash.

Just above the source of that vivid stream, where the outline of the collar bone was suggested through the flesh, was a small dark mole, emphasized by the white whiteness of the surroundings, and this trifle held him, as trifles do in dreams.

He could not see the face; he did not see the hand; he recognized the woman though there was a hint in the delicate outlines which almost brought a name which he could not remember, to his lips. He felt the whiteness of the surrounding, and then something snapped in his brain, he sank beneath the weight which was upon him, and yoked himself to the bed.

Until morning he sat on his bedside smoking and thinking, and his waking thoughts were almost as wild as his dreams.

He put those down sanely enough to the effect upon his mind of the scene in the topee, and scoffed at himself for his weak mindedness in allowing

such folly to weigh with him. His northern common sense warned against the superstition which is also northern, but in the still hours before dawn, nature will be heard, and nature is not always a reliable ally to what we call common sense.

He knew the volcanic temper of his race, he realized the hideous possibility of undoing with one moment of frenzy might accomplish, and with one face white and worn with his nights watching looked back at him as he shaved, hideously like the face he had seen in his dream.

At one moment he decided that such as he had no right to marry; that he would bring misery to the woman he loved; that the palmist's prophecy was a true warning which it was his duty to heed, and the next he laughed at himself as a fool almost frightened away from the woman he loved, just as that poor little Miss Brown had been frightened out of her life.

Egerton laughed at him of course, as sensible men do with the friends of their fellows, as much as to say that matters unconnected with the world they know, but Antrobous told his story so vividly and with such a feeling that the dream stayed even in Egerton's memory, and he thanked God that he at any rate was just a common and sane man with no wild northern imagination.

To Antrobous his friend's frank scorn of "all such rot as dreams" came as a healing balm.

A month after the reception, there was to be a dinner at Government House and after that one day of banquets for Antrobous, and a couple of months after that he was to have his great day of his life. He was, so they said, already as good as married.

From one spring scene or another, he had never happened to see Francis in a low dress since their engagement, and as to the time which preceded that, it was nebulous; at best only a vague impression.

The first sight of her on this night came to him as a shock. That she was beautiful he knew, but how beautiful it seemed to him now. He recognized the exquisite fairness of her skin, nor seen so superb a throat except in dreams. There was no doubt now as to the personality of the woman who lay upon the bed, except all her hair that God for it; that, search as he would, there was no blemish however tiny, to emphasize the ivory whiteness of her bosom.

"Why Harry, you look as if you had seen a ghost."

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