

The Quest of the Sacred Slipper

By

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1. The Phantom Scimitar

I was not the only passenger aboard the S.S. Mandalay who perceived the disturbance and wondered what it might portend and from whence proceed. A goodly number of passengers were joining the ship at Port Said. I was lounging against the rail, pipe in mouth, lazily wondering, with a large vagueness.

What a heterogeneous rabble it was! - a brightly coloured rabble, but the colours all were dirty, like the town and the canal. Only the sky was clean; the sky and the hard, merciless sunlight which spared nothing of the uncleanness, and defied one even to think of the term dear to tourists, "picturesque." I was in that kind of mood. All the natives appeared to be pockmarked; all the Europeans greasy with perspiration.

But what was the stir about?

I turned to the dark, bespectacled young man who leaned upon the rail beside me. From the first I had taken to Mr. Ahmad Ahmadeen.

"There is some kind of undercurrent of excitement among the natives," I said, "a sort of subdued Greek chorus is audible. What's it all about?"

Mr. Ahmadeen smiled. After a gaunt fashion, he was a handsome man and had a pleasant smile.

"Probably," he replied, "some local celebrity is joining the ship."

I stared at him curiously.

"Any idea who he is?" (The soul of the copyhunter is a restless soul.)

A group of men dressed in semi-European fashion - that is, in European fashion save for their turbans, which were green - passed close to us along the deck.

Ahmadeen appeared not to have heard the question.

The disturbance, which could only be defined as a subdued uproar, but could be traced to no particular individual or group, grew momentarily louder - and died away. It was only when it had completely ceased that one realized how pronounced it had been - how altogether peculiar, secret; like that incomprehensible murmuring in a bazaar when, unknown to the insular visitor, a reputed saint is present.

Then it happened; the inexplicable incident which, though I knew it not, heralded the coming of strange things, and the dawn of a new power; which should set up its secret standards in England, which should flood Europe and the civilized world with wonder.

A shrill scream marked the overture - a scream of fear and of pain, which dropped to a groan, and moaned out into the silence of which it was the cause.

"My God! what's that?"

I started forward. There was a general crowding rush, and a darkly tanned and bearded man came on board, carrying a brown leather case. Behind him surged those who bore the victim.

"It's one of the lascars!"

"No - an Egyptian!"

"It was a porter -?"

"What is it -?"

"Someone been stabbed!"

"Where's the doctor?"

"Stand away there, if you please!"

That was a ship's officer; and the voice of authority served to quell the disturbance. Through a lane walled with craning heads they bore the insensible man. Ahmadeen was at my elbow.

"A Copt," he said softly. "Poor devil!" I turned to him. There was a queer expression on his lean, clean-shaven, bronze face.

"Good God!" I said. "His hand has been cut off!"

That was the fact of the matter. And no one knew who was responsible for the atrocity. And no one knew what had become of the severed hand! I wasted not a moment in linking up the story. The pressman within me acted automatically.

"The gentleman just come aboard, sir," said a steward, "is Professor Deeping. The poor beggar who was assaulted was carrying some of the Professor's baggage. The whole incident struck me as most odd. There was an idea lurking in my mind that something else - something more - lay behind all this. With impatience I awaited the time when the injured man, having received medical attention, was conveyed ashore, and Professor Deeping reappeared. To the celebrated traveller and Oriental scholar I introduced myself.

He was singularly reticent.

"I was unable to see what took place, Mr. Cavanagh," he said. "The poor fellow was behind me, for I had stepped from the boat ahead of him. I had just taken a bag from his hand, but he was carrying another, heavier one. It is a clean cut, like that of a scimitar. I have seen very similar wounds in the cases of men who have suffered the old Moslem penalty for theft."

Nothing further had come to light when the Mandalay left, but I found new matter for curiosity in the behaviour of the Moslem party who had come on board at Port Said.

In conversation with Mr. Bell, the chief officer, I learned that the supposed leader of the party was one, Mr. Azrael. "Obviously," said Bell, "not his real name or not all it. I don't suppose they'll show themselves on deck; they've got their own servants with them, and seem to be people of consequence."

This conversation was interrupted, but I found my unseen fellow voyagers peculiarly interesting and pursued inquiries in other directions. I saw members of the distinguished travellers' retinue going about their duties, but never obtained a glimpse of Mr. Azrael nor of any of his green-turbaned companions.

"Who is Mr. Azrael?" I asked Ahmadeen.

"I cannot say," replied the Egyptian, and abruptly changed the subject.

Some curious aroma of mystery floated about the ship. Ahmadeen conveyed to me the idea that he was concealing something. Then, one night, Mr. Bell invited me to step forward with him.

"Listen," he said.

>From somewhere in the fo'c'sle proceeded low chanting.

"Hear it?"

"Yes. What the devil is it?"

"It's the lascars," said Bell. "They have been behaving in a most unusual manner ever since the mysterious Mr. Azrael joined us. I may be wrong in associating the two things, but I shan't be sorry to see the last of our mysterious passengers."

The next happening on board the Mandalay which I have to record was the attempt to break open the door of Professor Deeping's stateroom. Except when he was actually within, the Professor left his room door religiously locked.

He made light of the affair, but later took me aside and told me a curious story of an apparition which had appeared to him.

"It was a crescent of light," he said, "and it glittered through the darkness there to the left as I lay in my berth."

"A reflection from something on the deck?"

Deeping smiled, uneasily.

"Possibly," he replied; "but it was very sharply defined. Like the blade of a scimitar," he added.

I stared at him, my curiosity keenly aroused. "Does any explanation suggest itself to you?" I said.

"Well," he confessed, "I have a theory, I will admit; but it is rather going back to the Middle Ages. You see, I have lived in the East a lot; perhaps I have assimilated some of their superstitions."

He was oddly reticent, as ever. I felt convinced that he was keeping something back. I could not stifle the impression that the clue to these mysteries lay somewhere around the invisible Mohammedan party.

"Do you know," said Bell to me, one morning, "this trip's giving me the creeps. I believe the damned ship's haunted! Three bells in the middle watch last night, I'll swear I saw some black animal crawling along the deck, in the direction of the forward companion-way."

"Cat?" I suggested.

"Nothing like it," said Mr. Bell. "Mr. Cavanagh, it was some uncanny thing! I'm afraid I can't explain quite what I mean, but it was something I wanted to shoot!"

"Where did it go?"

The chief officer shrugged his shoulders. "Just vanished," he said. "I hope I don't see it again."

At Tilbury the Mohammedan party went ashore in a body. Among them were veiled women. They contrived so to surround a central figure that I entirely failed to get a glimpse of the mysterious Mr. Azrael. Ahmadeen was standing close by the companion-way, and I had a momentary impression that one of the women slipped something into his hand. Certainly, he started; and his dusky face seemed to pale.

Then a deck steward came out of Deeping's stateroom, carrying the brown bag which the Professor had brought aboard at Port Said. Deeping's voice came:

"Hi, my man! Let me take that bag!"

The bag changed hands. Five minutes later, as I was preparing to go ashore, arose a horrid scream above the berthing clamour. Those passengers yet aboard made in the direction from which the scream had proceeded.

A steward - the one to whom Professor Deeping had spoken - lay writhing at the foot of the stairs leading to the saloon-deck. His right hand had been severed above the wrist!

2. The Girl With The Violet Eyes

During the next day or two my mind constantly reverted to the incidents of the voyage home. I was perfectly convinced that the curtain had been partially raised upon some fantasy in which Professor Deeping figured.

But I had seen no more of Deeping nor had I heard from him, when abruptly I found myself plunged again into the very vortex of his troubled affairs. I was half way through a long article, I remember, upon the mystery of the outrage at the docks. The poor steward whose hand had been severed lay in a precarious condition, but the police had utterly failed to trace the culprit.

I had laid down my pen to relight my pipe (the hour was about ten at night) when a faint sound from the direction of the outside door attracted my attention. Something had been thrust through the letter-box.

"A circular," I thought, when the bell rang loudly, imperatively.

I went to the door. A square envelope lay upon the mat - a curious envelope, pale amethyst in colour. Picking it up, I found it to bear my name - written simply -

"Mr. Cavanagh."

Tearing it open I glanced at the contents. I threw open the door. No one was visible upon the landing, but when I leaned over the banister a white-clad figure was crossing the hall, below.

Without hesitation, hatless, I raced down the stairs. As I crossed the dimly lighted hall and came out into the peaceful twilight of the court, my elusive visitor glided under the archway opposite.

Just where the dark and narrow passage opened on to Fleet Street I overtook her - a girl closely veiled and wrapped in a long coat of white ermine.

"Madam," I said.

She turned affrightedly.

"Please do not detain me!" Her accent was puzzling, but pleasing. She glanced apprehensively about her.

You have seen the moon through a mist? - and known it for what it was in spite of its veiling? So, now, through the cloudy folds of the veil, I saw the stranger's eyes, and knew them for the most beautiful eyes I had ever seen, had ever dreamt of.

"But you must explain the meaning of your note!"

"I cannot! I cannot! Please do not ask me!"

She was breathless from her flight and seemed to be trembling. >From behind the cloud her eyes shone brilliantly, mysteriously.

I was sorely puzzled. The whole incident was bizarre - indeed, it had in it something of the uncanny. Yet I could not detain the girl against her will. That she went in apprehension of something, of someone, was evident.

Past the head of the passage surged the noisy realities of Fleet Street. There were men there in quest of news; men who would have given much for such a story as this in which I was becoming entangled. Yet a story more tantalizingly incomplete could not well be imagined.

I knew that I stood upon the margin of an arena wherein strange adversaries warred to a strange end. But a mist was over all. Here, beside me, was one who could disperse the mist - and would not. Her one anxiety seemed to be to escape.

Suddenly she raised her veil; and I looked fully into the only really violet eyes I had ever beheld. Mentally, I started. For the face framed in the snowy fur was the most bewitchingly lovely imaginable. One rebellious lock of wonderful hair swept across the white brow. It was brown hair, with an incomprehensible sheen in the high lights that suggested the heart of a blood-red rose.

"Oh," she cried, "promise me that you will never breathe a word to any one about my visit!"

"I promise willingly," I said; "but can you give me no hint?"

"Honestly, truly, I cannot, dare not, say more! Only promise that you will do as I ask!"

Since I could perceive no alternative -

"I will do so," I replied.

"Thank you - oh, thank you!" she said; and dropping her veil again she walked rapidly away from me, whispering, "I rely upon you. Do not fail me. Good-bye!"

Her conspicuous white figure joined the hurrying throngs upon the pavement beyond. My curiosity brooked no restraint. I hurried to the end of the courtway. She was crossing the road. From the shadows where he had lurked, a man came forward to meet her. A vehicle obstructed the view ere I could confirm my impression; and when it had passed, neither my lovely visitor nor her companion were anywhere in sight.

But, unless some accident of light and shade had deceived me, the man who had waited was Ahmad Ahmadeen!

It seemed that some astral sluice-gate was raised; a dreadful sense of foreboding for the first time flooded my mind. Whilst the girl had stood before me it had been different - the mysterious charm of her personality had swamped all else. But now, the messenger gone, it was the purport of her message which assumed supreme significance.

Written in odd, square handwriting upon the pale amethyst paper, this was the message-

Prevail upon Professor Deeping to place what he has in the brown case in the porch of his house to-night. If he fails to do so, no power on earth can save him from the Scimitar of Hassan.

A FRIEND.

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