

The Social Pirates :-:

Story No. 15--Black Magic

Plot by George Bronson Howard
Novelization by Hugh C. Weir :: Copyright Kalem Company

Mary Burnett suddenly held up a warning hand, and tip-toed to the door. The trio behind her stopped their laughter, and looked after her curiously. They, too, had heard the sound of voices, raised in argument, in the entrance hall of the fashionable apartment building, where Mary and her chum, Mona Hartley, had taken a small suite.

Mary opened the door softly, and peered out. In the hall were standing a man and a woman—the former especially noticeable because of the costume of an East Indian which he wore, and the tan on his face, suggesting a recent return from the tropics. His companion was quite obviously a woman of wealth and refinement. Her gown bore all the signs of the expensive simplicity of a fashionable designer. Just now her face was unattractively white, and she was staring at her escort with wide eyes.

The East Indian stepped closer to her, and passed his hand swiftly before her eyes with the gesture of a professional conjurer. The woman stiffened, her breast heaving, her hands clenched. The man peered closer into her face, shrugged, and, stopping, inserted a key in the door of the opposite apartment, motioned for her to enter. It was not until the couple had disappeared that Mary turned, and then she saw that her companions were gathered about her shoulders. They, too, had witnessed the strange tableau.

"Can you beat it?" gasped Rodney Grant, the young newspaper reporter, who, in company with Casper Carson, the millionaire philanthropist and social worker, had been calling on the girls. "Was the woman really hypnotized?"

Carson frowned, as he stepped back into the living room. "Don't like the looks of it," he said soberly. "There was something about that little scene which—" He stopped, hesitating for a word, and Mary, motioning the others back, stepped softly across the hall until she was just opposite the door. Kneeling down, she peered through the keyhole. She saw the Hindoo make more passes in front of the woman, and then, under the domination of his stronger will, the woman handed him a paper. Then the curious couple left the apartment. A moment later Mary, with a skeleton key, entered the room and seized the paper, which proved to be a safe combination. She copied the figures and returned to her room.

"Looks like a combination," said Grant.

"It is a combination, stupid!" returned Mary. "And that is why the Hindoo wanted it. The poor woman is evidently completely in his power, and was probably obeying orders when she came here with him tonight."

Carson nodded thoughtfully. "I am going to do some investigating," he decided. "First, I am going to see what the janitor can tell me about our curious friend."

The janitor was quite ready to talk when Carson showed him a \$5 bill, but he could supply little information except the fact that the occupant of the apartment was a Hindoo, who gave the name of Hadj Rulu, and that he had quite a large number of visitors, most of whom were well dressed women, who came in private automobiles. As for the rest of it, the man kept only one servant, a Hindoo like himself, said his rent promptly, and had little to say to anyone.

As it developed, it was quite as much coincidence as skill that Mary and Mona chanced on the next clue to the case. They were passing a fashionable hair-dressing establishment on a shopping tour the next afternoon when a woman emerged from the doorway, and crossed the walk just ahead of them. It was none other than Mrs. Wallace.

Mary and Mona watched her step into a private limousine and drive away.

"Whatever in the world is the matter?" cried Mona as Mary suddenly seized her arm.

"I have thought of a way to reach the heart of my mystery," was the quick response. "I am going to call on Mrs. Wallace this afternoon, and see if she doesn't want to hire my professional services! I am going to be a hair dresser and manicurist," explained Mary, "one who specializes in giving home treatments to wealthy citizens."

Two hours later Mary rang the bell at the Wallace home, and explained the nature of her errand to Mrs. Wallace, who agreed to have her begin treatment the next day.

Mary was rising when a maid entered, and announced, "Mr. Hadj Rulu." Evidently the maid was unfamiliar with the Hindoo's native prefix, and it was apparent also that she was in awe if not fear of the visitor. At once Mrs. Wallace's gay manner vanished. She fell back in her chair, gripping her fingers convulsively, her face whitening. With an effort she roused herself, and followed the maid, apparently forgetting Mary's presence entirely. The girl glided behind a chair until Mrs. Wallace had reached the stairs and then followed.

Mrs. Wallace entered the library where the man was awaiting her. Mary hesitated, and then observing that no one was in the lower hall, followed boldly after her until she reached a point outside the library door, where she could observe what transpired in the room beyond. The Hindoo had risen from his chair, and was bowing over Mrs. Wallace's hand. He straightened gracefully, and fixed his dark eyes in a piercing glance on her face. Mary saw the woman beginning to shiver as she had done the previous night, and then the Hindoo repeated the mysterious passes which he had made before across her eyes. It required only a moment for the effects of the mesmeric spell to show. Mrs. Wallace's stiffness increased and her eyes dilated.

The Hindoo stepped back, and from his pocket produced a curious slip of paper which the woman had brought to him the previous evening. He read aloud the combination it contained, and pointed to the farther end of the room, where Mary could see a small separate safe.

"You will open that," he commanded in a low, penetrating tone.

Unhesitatingly Mrs. Wallace obeyed, crossing the room like a person in a trance, and twisting the knob at the Hindoo's suggestion. When the door swung open, the Hindoo peered over his shoulder.

"You will bring me what you see before you," he directed. Again Mrs. Wallace followed his orders without

effect of her work, she drew a deep sigh of relief.

Mrs. Wallace showed no signs of displeasure at the result. In fact, she was about to express her approbation when suddenly the entrance of the maid interrupted.

"Mr. Hadj Rulu is in the library," she announced.

Again Mrs. Wallace stiffened, and Mary saw her hand clench, as though in an effort to control her nervousness. Then, as before, she rose abruptly from her chair and left the room. Mary was following when the street door opened, and there stepped into the hall a man, whose every movement cried out that he was a plain clothes detective. The girl paused, watching breathlessly as he also made his way to the library. Would the presence of the Hindoo be discovered, and, if so, what would be the result? It was quite evident that Hadj Rulu did not care to have his presence advertised.

The reason for the detective's presence was explained by his first words. "Mr. Wallace reports that he has been robbed, and that so far as he knows no person in this house knew of the combination of his safe, where the money was placed, except himself. It looks like an 'inside job,' Mrs. Wallace. What do you think?"

"I am sure the servants are innocent," said Mrs. Wallace quickly. "I would stake my life on them."

"That is generally the kind who will bear watching," said the detective cynically. "Who is the girl who has charge of the cleaning and dusting of this room?"

"That is Hattie, one of our younger maids, who has been with us all her life," answered Mrs. Wallace.

The detective surveyed the maid authoritatively and literally barked his questions at her, as though priding himself on the fear and repulsion which the girl exhibited.

"What did you do with the combination of that safe?" he demanded.

"What do you mean? I know you took it from the red book on the top of the shelf, where you watched Mr. Wallace hide it! Now, give us the truth! No lies!"

The maid covered back, ready to burst into tears, and Mrs. Wallace laid a hand encouragingly on her shoulder. The detective scowled at the gesture, and renewed his cross-examination.

And then suddenly Mary saw a hand steal out from the curtains of the opposite doorway, which she knew the Hindoo was concealed— a lean, brown hand, and in its fingers was the paper which Mrs. Wallace obediently had delivered to her master in the trance. The next instant the paper was dropped into an apron pocket of the weeping Hattie, with the action unseemly except by the watching girl in the hall.

If the detective insisted now on a search, what would be the result? Evidently the officer had been disappointed in the result of his fusillade of questions, for suddenly he dismissed the girl, with no attempt to search her. Mary had just time to dart to the stairs when Hattie appeared in the hall, weeping, and followed to the upper floor behind her.

Mary thought swiftly. If the Hindoo had succeeded in slipping the combination into the girl's pocket, why should she not succeed in slipping it into the pocket? On the sudden thought, she called the maid to her, and under the pretense of asking her some questions as to the best hour to call on Mrs. Wallace in future, she managed to reach her pocket, and fasten her fingers on the tell-tale paper.

A few minutes later she saw the detective depart and hardly waiting until he was out of the yard, the Hindoo hurried down the hall, and to the street. The coast was now clear, and descending to the lower corridor, Mary nodded brightly to the butler, and followed serenely to the walk. The Hindoo had vanished, but the girl was not concerned with him for the present. She realized that she now held the trump card, that Fate had suddenly and unexpectedly given her a lever over the man, which even the other's adroitness could not escape. How could she use it to the best advantage, and with the most telling results?

At the Royalton she received her answer. To explain the situation which greeted her on her return, however, it is necessary to go back to the morning, and trace the movements of Mona when the other left to keep her appointment with Mrs. Wallace.

Mona had watched Hadj Rulu depart on his way to the Wallace home, although the girl of course did not know his destination at the time. She knew only that the Hindoo was gone that his apartment was apparently unguarded, and that the coast was clear for an intimate investigation of the mysterious premises. Should she undertake it? Her question was answered by the appearance of Casper Carson, grinning broadly.

"I passed that Hindoo chap downstairs," he announced, "and he stared at me as though he were making a mental photograph of my handsome features." Do you suppose that he knows me?"

Mona laughed. "He thinks he knows you. He thinks that you are Wallace, the banker."

Carson started. "Where in the world did he get that absurd idea?"

"From me," said the girl sweetly. "You don't object, do you. When I saw him and told him my troubles, he asked me to describe the appearance of the guardian who had victimized me. I suspected that he had never seen the real Wallace, and that he had timed his visit to the house deliberately so as to escape embarrassing questions from the husband of the woman in his power. Therefore, I jumped at a chance, and sketched a hasty word picture of you as my villain. Evidently my picture must have been a fairly accurate one."

"Evidently," agreed Carson drily. "But I don't catch your purpose?"

"That ought to be self-evident. You are to appear at Hadj Rulu's apartments as Wallace at the psychological moment. You see, I am to take you there for a seance, and he is going to make you confess your wrong to me—and atone!"

"Oh, he is, is he?"

Mona nodded. "And that reminds me that right now is an excellent time to make a little informal examination of the apartment of mystery. He is gone, and we can go through the place easily before he gets back."

The apartment was not occupied, and it was apparent that the stage

of no mercy!" He clapped his hands, and Grant stepped forth from the inner room—a silent, accusing witness.

"Have pity!" said Carson quaveringly, catching the Hindoo's arm entreatingly. "I swear I shall make reparation for what I have done! I swear that my ward shall not suffer in any way!"

"How shall you make this reparation?" asked Hadj Rulu, opening his eyes suddenly.

"That is simple. I will go at once and secure the stocks and deeds that represent her property, and I will turn them over to her—in your presence, if you wish!"

"How long will it take?"

"Oh, a mere matter of a few moments. The papers are in my private box at my bank. I can take a taxi-cab. But you will promise, both of you, that if I do this you will make no exposure?"

Mona looked at the Hindoo, and Hadj Rulu nodded slightly.

"We promise," she agreed, apparently unnerfed at her guardian's sudden unmasking and confession.

Carson staggered from the room and Mona and Rodney Grant were left alone with the Hindoo. Hadj Rulu turned to the newspaper man and ordered him early out of the room. For just an instant, Grant hesitated, and then remembering his supposed character, he bowed deeply and obeyed. When he vanished, Mona turned to Hadj Rulu impulsively.

"How can I ever thank you?" she began, looking at him admiringly. "You are the most marvelous man I ever knew."

"I is nothing," protested Hadj Rulu.

"Perhaps not—to you. But it means everything to me. I know what I can do to show my appreciation of you. Will you accept the management of my estate? Of course, I cannot go on forever with Mr. Wallace after what has happened."

Hadj Rulu walked back and forth over the floor, as though debating the question.

"I hardly know what to say. In the first place, I very much fear that you may be disappointed, my young friend. Your guardian may find it impossible to restore what is rightfully yours, and I fear that in spite of all I do you may suffer financially."

"Do you really think so?" asked Mona in dismay.

"I'll tell you what I might do, if it would help you. When your guardian returns with your papers I will buy a half interest in them for cash, if you wish it. I will give you \$10,000. Of course, my interest may not be worth so much, but I am willing to do it if it will be of any benefit to you, my little high priestess."

"Oh, thank you! Thank you!" said Mona, impulsively. "You are noble and generous as well as shrewd and successful!"

When Carson returned with his bundle of counterfeit deeds and papers, the Hindoo accepted them and gave Mary ten thousand as his half interest. They were leaving the flat when Mrs. Wallace, who was summoned by a telephone in a nearby apartment, was announced.

Hadj Rulu frowned for a moment, and then quickly recovered himself. "You are just in time, my dear friend, to witness the unmasking of your husband, whom I have discovered to my surprise and sorrow is an unmitigated scoundrel!"

"My husband?" asked Mrs. Wallace in bewilderment. "Where is he?"

"There!" cried Hadj Rulu, pointing to Carson.

"But that man is not my husband!" The Hindoo whirled on Mona with a sudden suspicion, and saw her grinning.

"What does this mean?" he snarled. There came another ring at the bell. The visitor this time was Howard Wallace, the banker, in actual fact. At sight of his wife, he stepped forward angrily.

"What does this mean?" he demanded, unconsciously using Hadj Rulu's own question.

"It means that we have recovered for you your stolen property," said Mona, stepping forward and extending the bank notes she had just received. "The person who robbed your safe is the so-called Hadj Rulu—using your wife as a helpless accomplice

"There's a whole lot in what Mrs. Wallace said, Mary, do you realize that?" she mused.

Mary, whose thoughts apparently had been following the same channel, nodded comprehensively.

"I haven't asked you much about Mr. Grant," Mona went on, "largely because you have avoided questioning me about Casper. But we've never had any secrets from each other. Tell me, has he asked you?" She broke off suddenly, as if she hesitated to speak the words.

Mary blushed and nodded. "I promised Rodney that this would be our last adventure. I've been telling him that I could not consider becoming his wife until the mission which you and I set out to accomplish had been performed."

"That's practically what I told Casper," said Mona, blushing. "And he made me promise to give him my answer tonight, with no more evasions."

Mary jumped up and clasped Mona in her arms. "And what are you going to tell him?" she exclaimed.

Mona hung her head. "The same thing you are going to tell Mr. Grant," she smiled. "Surely we have accomplished what we set out to do. The last note goes into my diary right away. Of course," she went on, "we won't decline to help any needy person who calls upon us, but having helped so many that the law could not aid, it's high time we thought of shaping our own happiness."

"You're right," murmured Mary. "And no one can blame us for buying trousseaus with this latest reward. They cost so confounded much nowadays."

THE END.

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