

# The Carpet of Belshazzar

By Robert W. Chambers

We all were glad to see him; on his return he had found us all his friends. Nobody had spoken to him about his abrupt departure from New York; nobody had mentioned Westover; nothing connected with that episode was even hinted at by any of us, I believe, during his short sojourn among us. It was he himself who spoke of it first.

Of course during his absence we had followed his career; many among us had read and tried to understand what he had written in his three world-famous volumes, "Occult Philosophy," "The Weight of Human Souls," and "The Interstellar Laws of Psychic Phenomena."

It seemed, at times, here to us in America, that it was impossible that the man we had known so well could have become the great Psychic Scientist who had written these three astounding works—who now occupied the Chair of Psychical Philosophy in the great University of Trebizond—the man who was the confidential adviser of the Shah of Persia, the mentor of the Ameer of Afghanistan, the inspirer of the greatest diplomat of all the East—the late Akhound of Swat.

As he sat there in his immaculate evening dress, bronzed, youthful looking, presiding so quietly at the little dinner which he had given to us as a half-formal, half-intimate leave-taking before he sailed, it seemed to us incredible that this man, now on his return journey to Trebizond *via* Lhassa, could be the beloved and dreaded arbiter of Asiatic politics—the one white man in all the Orient who had ever been wholly respected, and absolutely feared by the temporal and spiritual heads of nations, religions, clans, and sects.

That, of course, he was what is popularly known as an adept, we supposed. What his wisdom, his insight, his amazing knowledge of the occult might include, we preferred, rather uncomfortably, not to conjecture.

There is, naturally, in all of us a childlike desire to hear of marvels; there is also a stronger and more childish desire to see miracles performed.

I am quite sure that we all hoped he might perhaps care to do something for us—merely to convince us. And at first, I know that many among us, seated there in the private room at the Lenox Club, felt a trifle ill at ease and a little in awe of this man with whom we were at such close quarters.

There was nothing particularly remarkable about the dinner; it was the usual excellent affair one might expect at the Lenox; the wines perfect, the service flawless.

And now, smoking our cigars, lounging in groups over the flower-laden table, we fell into the old, intimate, easy channels of conversation, chatting of past days, of our hopes and ambitions.

And our host, quiet, self-contained, pushed back his chair, looking somewhat curiously, I thought, from one to the other. And I thought, too, as his pleasant bronzed features changed from a faint smile to a graver expression, and then reverted to the smile for a moment, that he seemed to see something in each of us that was perhaps hidden from ourselves—that, as his eyes swept us, he was not only capable of reading much of what was not understood by us, but also something in the hidden future which awaited each of us.

So strongly did this idea begin to take hold of me that it began to make me uneasy. I felt, too, that others among us harbored that same idea—for the conversation was less accented now, and intermittent; voices had fallen to a lower, quieter pitch; and after a little nobody spoke.

Then I saw that we all were looking straight at our host, as though under some subtle and fascinated compulsion.

He sat very still; his composure appeared a trifle forced, as though he had voicelessly summoned us to concentrate upon him our attention, and was now searching for the exact words for some statement which he had meant to make to us all.

After a moment a slight flush crept over his handsome face. He said:

“You fellows are very good to come here and let me take leave of you so pleasantly. You have been very kind to me since I have come again among you. The sort of friendship that asks nothing but takes a man for granted is a good sort. Helmer,”—he looked at the sculptor Helmer—“I shall see you soon again.” We all turned in surprise to Helmer, who seemed as surprised as we were. “I shall see you sooner than you expect . . . Smith!”—he smiled at J. Abingdon Smith, 3d—“some day you will uproot a Tree of Dreams, but not the dream, Smith; that will become very real when you awake—as true”—and he turned to the man on his left—“as true as a dream which you shall dream under the Sign of Venus.”

We sat there breathless, expectant. He was doing something after all; he was prophesying, in a curious sort of manner, probably speaking in symbols. And though we could not understand, we listened while the little shivers fluttered our pulses.

Then he looked at Edgerton, smiling; and Edgerton flushed up and looked back at him, almost defiantly.

“Edgerton,” he said, ‘don’t worry too much. What is not to be settled in court can sometimes be settled—*ex curia*.” And to the young man on his right: “Doctor, don’t overwork. If you do you will learn a stranger truth than is locked up among the molecules and atoms in your laboratory!”

Then he leaned across the table and laid one hand on Leeds’s shoulder. “I congratulate you,” he said, smiling; “you’ve got a good-natured ghost following you about. But he’ll leave you if you turn idle. And don’t be afraid, my boy.”

“I’m not afraid,” said young Leeds, rather pallid, but straightening up in his chair.

Our host laughed; then his face changed, and he raised his eyes to Shannon:

“Where is Harrod?” he asked slowly.

“At Bar Harbor,” replied Shannon, “I believe.”

“I thought so. And—remember one thing—there is a certain law which governs the validity of a check drawn to a man’s order when that check has been signed by a man no longer living. But, Shannon, the intention is the important thing in such a matter.”

“What, exactly, do you mean?” asked Shannon, astonished.

But our host had already turned to Escourt:

“Captain,” he said, “you sail—when?”

“I have no sailing orders,” laughed Escourt.

“Not yet?” Our host looked quietly at the young officer. “Well, it isn’t the length of a voyage that counts, Escourt—nor the size of the troopship. No; you will anchor, some day, in a smaller craft than you started in, in the Port of the Golden Pool.”

Escourt, still smiling, waited; but our host sat silent, head bent, one hand on the edge of the tablecloth.

“Not one of you,” he said, without raising his eyes, ‘not one among you but who shall come face to face with what you still consider miracles. Even Hildreth, yonder”—Hildreth jumped—“even Hildreth shall learn from the Swastika.”

“Swa—swat? What—what?” stammered Hildreth.

“Nothing to alarm you,” smiled the other; then again the swift shadow fell across his face.

“Not one man among you who has not proven his friendship for me,” he said, looking up and around. And to me he added: “You must prove it still further by telling fearlessly to the world what there will be to tell after I have gone, and after my words have been proven—the words I have spoken here to-night—and which no one among you understands. . . . But you all will understand them. And when the last man among you has understood”—turning again to me—you must bear witness to the world, bear witness in printed page and over your own signature. Do you promise?”

“Yes,” I said.

Then very quietly he looked around the table, and leaned forward, regarding each man in turn.

“I think,” he said, “that it is time you understood exactly the facts about which you have forborne to question me. And I mean to tell you before we part; I mean to tell you the truth concerning Westover and—all that happened.. .And when you know these facts, then you may begin to surmise why I went to Trebizond, why I remain, and—and—what *miracle of happiness I have found there—for the third time reincarnated.*”

He leaned back in his chair; his clear eyes became fixed and dreamy. Then he began to speak, in a low voice, as though to himself:

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Time, and the funeral of Time, alas!—and the Old Year’s passing-bell! Whistles from city and river, deep horns sounding from the foggy docks; and under my window a voice and a song—ah! that young voice in the street below calling me through the falling snow!

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If it be true that Time makes all hurts well, I do not know; and “a thousand years in Thy sight is but as yesterday when it is passed, and as a watch in the night”; a thousand years! And this also is true; the flames of love make hot the furnace of Abaddon.

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We were in the gallery as usual, Geraldine and I—the gallery where the carpets of the East were hung along the shadowy walls. For lately it was my pleasure to acquire rare rugs, and it was my profession to furnish expert opinion upon the age and origin of Oriental carpets, and to read and interpret the histories of forgotten emperors and the mysteries of long-forgotten gods from the colors and intricate flowery labyrinths tied in silk or wool to the warps of some dead sultan’s lustrous tapestry.

Here in the long sky gallery hung my own rugs against the arabesque incrustated-ivory panels—Tabriz, Shiraz, Sehna, and Saruk—a somber blaze of color shot with fire—all rare, some priceless; Turkish Kulah, softly silky as a golden lion’s hide, Persian Sehna, shimmering with rose and violet lights, fiercely brilliant rugs from Samarkand, superbly flowered, secreting deep in every floral thicket traceries of the ancient Mongol conqueror; Feraghans glowing like jewel-sewn velvets set with the Herati and the lotus—symbols of Egypt or of China, as you please to interpret the oldest pattern in the world.

Far in the gallery’s amber-tinted gloom the red of Ispahan dominated, subduing fiery vistas to

smoldering harmony through which, like a vast sapphire set in opals, glimmered the superb lost Persian blue.

There was one other rug, an Eighur, the famous so-called “Babilu” or “Carpet of Belshazzar”; but it hung alone in imperial magnificence behind the locked doors of a marble room, which it seemed to fill with a soft luster of its own, radiating from the mystic “Tree of Heaven” woven in its center.

We were, as I say, in this gallery; Geraldine poring over an illuminated volume on cuneiform inscriptions, I, with pad and pencil, idly shifting and reshifting the Kufic key to the ancient cipher, which always left me stranded where I had begun with the stately repetition:

“King of Kings—  
King of Kings—  
King of Kings—”

As for Westover, my cousin, he was, as usual, in the laboratory fussing with his venomous extracts—an occupation which, to my dismay, he had taken up within the year, working, as he explained, on the theory that every poison has its antidote. Yet it seemed to me that he was more anxious to invent some new and subtle toxic than to devise the remedy.

From where I sat I could not see him, but the crystalline tinkle of his glass retorts and bottles distracted my attention from the penciled calculations. Without moving my head, I glanced across the room at Geraldine. She looked up immediately, raising her level eyebrows in mute inquiry as though I had moved or spoken; then, realizing that I had not, she bent above the book once more, the warm color stealing to her cheeks.

Within the year a wordless intimacy had grown up between us; we never understood it, never acknowledged it, and at times it disconcerted us.

I sat silent, tracing with my pencil series after series of futile Kufic combinations with the cuneiforms, but ever the first turn of the ancient key creaked in my ears,

“King of Kings—  
King of Kings—”

until the triverbal reiteration wore on my nerves.

Geraldine leaned back abruptly, closing her book.

“I’m tired and nervous,” she said. “You may wear out your eyes and temper if you choose—and you’re doing the latter, for I’m as restless as an eel. Besides, I’m lonely, and I’m going back to the East—if you’ll come, too.”

I laughed, understanding what she meant by the “East.”

“Will you come with me?” she insisted.

“Yes,” I said, “whenever you are ready.”

She sprang to her feet, scattering the illuminated pages over the floor, and stood an instant facing me, tall, dark-eyed, smiling, brushing back the lustrous hair from her cheeks.

“Where is Jim?” she asked—although we both knew.

“In the laboratory,” I replied mechanically.

Still busy with her hair, she regarded me dreamily out of those dark, sweet eyes of hers.

“It would be wonderful,” she mused, “if Jim should find an antidote to death; but I wish it were not necessary to kill so many little helpless creatures. Did you hear that pitiful sound in

there yesterday? Was it something he was killing?"

"I don't know," I said. And after a silence: "What are you going to do?"

She shook her head vaguely and leaned against the window, looking out into the rain.

"Shall we go back to our inscriptions?" I suggested.

She shook her head again. After a while she turned away from the window, stifling a dainty yawn, and stretched out, languidly straightening up to the full height of her young body.

"I feel stupid," she said; "I'm tired of cryptograms and the pages of dusty books. I'm tired of the rain, too. The languor of April is in me. I'm homesick for lands I never knew. So come back to the East with me, Dick"

She held out her hand to me with a confident little smile; and knowing what she meant, I acquiesced in her caprice, and conducted her solemnly to the piano, leaving her before it.

She stood there for a space, musing, her lovely head bent; then, still standing, she struck a sequence of chords—chords pulsating with color; and through them flashed strange little trills like threads of tinsel.

"This is an Eighur carpet I am dreaming of," she murmured, as the music swelled, glowing as tints and hues glow in the old dyes of the East.

Wave on wave of color seemed to spread from the keys under her fingers; she looked back at me over her shoulder with a warning nod.

"I shall begin to weave very soon. Khiounnou horsemen may appear and frighten me for a moment—but I shall finish. Listen! I am at the loom." Seating herself, she developed out of the flowing, somber harmony a monotonous minor theme, suddenly checked by a distant rattle like the clatter of nomad lances on painted stirrups; then she picked up the thread of the melody again, dropped it, breathless for a moment's quivering silence, resumed it, twisting it into delicate arabesques, threading it across the dull, rich harmonies, at first slowly, then faster, faster, swift as the flying fingers of a nomad maid tying fretted silver in a Ghiordes knot. The whirring tempo was the cadence of the loom; soft feathery notes flew like carded wool; thicker, duller, softer grew the fabric, dense, silky, heavily lustrous.

Suddenly she broke the thread off short, the whole fabric falling with a muffled shock,

"Why did you do that?" I demanded wrathfully.

"The rug is woven; the weaver is dead," she said.

"Oh, go on, Geraldine," I insisted; "don't stop half way in a thing like that. It's the East—it's the real East, I tell you. How you do it—you who have never seen the East—Heaven only knows!"

"U Allah Aalem," she murmured; "it's in me." Then she looked back at me, laughing. "Centuries ago you and I heard that music along the Arax—or I sang it among the Tcherkess roses for you, perhaps—perhaps in the gardens of Trebizond."

"That might explain it," I said gravely. Lately she had found pleasure in a fancy that she and I had lived together in the East, centuries since, and that we were soon to return forever.

"You and I," she mused, touching the keys lightly—"and Jim, of course," she added.

"Of course," I said.

She dropped her head, striking chord on chord with nervous precision; and hanging in the wake of every ringing harmony a frail melody floated like the Chinese cloud band in a Kirman tapestry.

"What's that air?" I asked, fascinated.

"I don't know; it sounds pagan, doesn't it? —like the wicked beauty of Babylon. Do you hear how it beats on and on like the rhythm of naked feet—little, delicate, naked feet ablaze with

gems—the feet of Herodiade perhaps—thud—thud—tching!—don't you hear them, Dick? And now listen to those silky, flowery trills! They're Asiatic; ancient Cathay is awaking—camel bells in the hazar of the Golden Emperor! Hark!—now you hear trumpets, don't you? Well, of course that must be the Mongols marching with the Prince of the Vanguard. Hark! How savagely the brutal Afghan theme breaks in with its fierce trampling and the staccato echo of Tekke drums! It's frightening me out of the East. I think we had better come home, Dick,” she added, mischievously running into the latest popular street song.

“How on earth could you do that!” I exclaimed wrathfully. “You're a futile mixture of feather brain and genius!”

But where was the genius hidden under that laughing and exquisite mask confronting me? Suddenly the delicate mask became grave.

“Let me laugh when I can, Dick,” she said. “It is not often I laugh.”

I was silent.

“Of course you may be horrid if you choose,” she observed with a shrug, running a brilliantly inane series of trills from end to end of the keyboard. “But it's no use scolding, for I won't study, I won't compose, I won't try to do something, and I won't be serious. I'm shallow, I'm frivolous, I've the soul of a Trebizond dancing girl, and I like it. Now what are you going to do?”

“I'm going out,” I said ungraciously.

“Oh—alone?”

“Not if you'll come. It's stopped raining. Will you come? Oh, get your hat, Geraldine, and stop that torment of idiotic trills!”

“If Jim doesn't mind, I think I'll go and sit in the laboratory with him,” she observed carelessly.

I looked at her without comment.

“I have a curious idea,” she continued, “that he might like to have me around to-day while he is working.”

I stared at her, but there was no bitterness in her tranquil smile as she leaned forward, resting her elbows on the polished rosewood case.

“So I won't go with you, Dick,” she said slowly.

One of those intervals of restless silence, which within the year we had learned to dread, menaced us now. Mute, motionless, I watched the soft color deepening in her face, then, impatient, roused myself and walked over to the laboratory. Westover looked up as I pushed aside the screen.

“Will you drive with us?” I asked. “The sun's out.”

He declined, peering at me through his glass mask.

“Come on, Jim,” I urged. “You've inhaled enough poison for one day. Take off your mask and wash your hands and drive us out to High Bridge. I'll telephone to the stable if you say the word, and they'll hook up the new four. Is it a go?”

“No,” he said coldly, and turned on his heel, lifting a test tube to the light.

He was more taciturn and a trifle uglier than usual. I watched him for a moment warming the test tube over a burner, then without further parley replaced the screen, closed the double glass doors, and walked back to Geraldine.

“Doesn't Jim care to come?” she asked.

I said that her husband appeared to be absorbed in his work.

“Very well,” she said, with airy composure; “trot along, Dicky—and if you see a bunch of jonquils growing on Fifth Avenue, you may pick them for me—or for that pretty girl you met at

Lakewood—”

“I’ll send you a bunch as big as a bushel.”

“A bushel of flowers is as compromising as a declaration,” she said. “Send them to her.”

“There’s only one way to settle it,” I said; “I’ll send them to the loveliest girl in the world—shall I?”

She assented, laughing uncertainly.

“I think I’ll pay Jim a little call,” she said, rising from the piano and walking slowly toward the laboratory.

A few moments later as I passed down the broad stairway I heard Westover’s penetrating voice: “Let that glass tube alone, Geraldine! Why the devil can’t you keep your hands off things when you come in here?”

I lingered for a while in the hallway, thinking that she might change her mind and come down, for she had left the laboratory to her husband, and I heard her moving about in her own apartment. She did not come, and after a little while I left the house, a sense of apprehension depressing me.

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The asphalt of Fifth Avenue was still wet with the first warm rain of April, but the sun glittered on window and pavement and flashed along the polished panels of carriages crowding the avenue from curb to curb. A breath of spring had set the sparrows chattering and chirping; the movement of the throng, the bright gowns, the fresh faces of young girls, and the endless façades of glass reflecting it—all were pleasant to me, a man sensitive to impressions.

And so in the pale sunshine I sauntered on through the throng, now idling curiously by some shop window whither a display of jewels or curios attracted me, now strolling on again content with the soft color in sky and sunlight.

I found a florist whose shop windows were filled with thickets of fragrant, fragile spring flowers; and every little scented blossom that I touched, choosing the freshest, nodded to the voiceless cadence of a name repeated—and: “Geraldine! Geraldine!” they nodded, so confidently, so sweetly, that what was I to do but send them to her?

And so I sauntered on again, threading the throng, half-minded to turn back, yet ever tempted on by idleness, until above me the twin spires of the cathedral glimmered, all silvered in the shimmering blue.

Halting, undecided, I presently became aware of an old man, his withered hands crossed before him, standing quite patiently under the cathedral terrace. Before him on the sidewalk rested a basket draped with a brilliant rug or two and heaped with tawdry rubbish—scarlet fezzes, slippers of spangled leather, tasseled charms of gilt, flimsy striped fabrics—all the worthless flummery known as “Oriental” to the good peoples of the West.

Few stopped to look; no one bought. As I passed him his dimmed gaze met mine; all the wistfulness of the very poor, all the mystery of the very, very old, was in his eyes. Moved by impulse, perhaps, I spoke to him in a low voice, using the Turkish language.

A dull animation came into his misty eyes.

“Allahou Ekber,” he muttered, in a trembling voice; “it is sweet to hear your words, my son.”

“Mussulman,” I said, “who are you who recite the Tekbir here under the spires of a Roman church?”

“Is there harm in bearing witness to the glory of God here under the minarets of your

cathedral?" he asked humbly.

"Spire and minaret are one to Him," I said. "Who are you, Mussulman?"

"My name is Khassar," he said; "my nation Eighur; my Iort is the IssigKul; Baï on-Aoul my clan. I am an Eighur Turk, a Khodja; and I am able to write the Turkish language in Arabic and in Eighur-Mongol characters."

"Reverend father," I said, full of astonishment and pity, "how should a Khodja of the Baï on-Aoul come to this? Even the Tekrin horseman halts at the sea."

"It is written," he said feebly, "that we belong to God and we return to Him."

Troubled, I stood there on the sidewalk, oblivious to the knot of idlers around us, curious to hear two men so different conversing in a common tongue.

I wished to give him something, yet did not venture to humiliate him without pretense of buying.

"Here is my card," I said, "on which is written my name and where I live. Bring me these rugs to-night, ata. I wish to buy."

"You do not desire them," he said, shaking his head. "You know the East; you understand these rugs; you know they are worthless, acid-washed, singed, rubbed with pumice, smoked—every vile Armenian practice used! You know the dyes are aniline; that they are loosely tied, hastily and flimsily woven by Armenian dogs and sons of dogs. You mean kindness; you have done me enough by speaking to me."

He passed his trembling hand over his ragged beard.

"You who know carpets and love them," he quavered; "listen attentively. I have a strip to show—not here—but I could bring it."

"Bring it," I said gently.

He fumbled in the pocket of his tattered coat and presently brought to light a scrap of paper on which was scrawled some Persian characters.

"It is such a carpet as I have never seen," he said; "there is nothing in our history or our traditions to teach us the meaning of this carpet—nothing save that it is an Eighur rug inscribed in Persian and in an unknown script. I have traced the characters in a single cartouche. Read, my son."

And I read, translating freely:

"Ten thousand thousand stars shine down on Babylon.  
The desert well reflects but one."

"I will bring the carpet," he said, after a silence. "I do not know its value; it has no beauty any longer; only the ghost of ancient splendor remains in the thin knots clinging to warp and weft. And it is old, my son, older than tradition. Upon it there is not one sign to teach us the mystery of its meaning."

He peered at me with his old, sad eyes, earnestly.

"I will bring it," he said. "Go with Ali, thou fair comrade of Hassan."

"May the Blessed Companions intervene for you," I said.

And so we parted, gravely and with circumstance, I to stroll homeward, touched, musing curiously upon this carpet of which a nomad Mussulman could make nothing. The Persian verse from the cartouche interested me, too, the refrain lingering persistently in my memory:

"Ten thousand thousand stars shine down on Babylon.

The desert well reflects but one.”

Never before, save on the imperial carpet known as Belshazzar’s Rug, had I encountered any inscription mentioning Babylon. So, at the first glance, the nomad’s rug should have some value. But speculation was futile—surely I ought to have learned that if unnumbered disappointments could teach me anything.

Thinking of these things, I passed along the noble avenue, retracing my steps to the big dusky house standing alone, with two old trees to guard it—relics, like the mansion, of the great city’s infancy—the last old dwelling left marooned amid the arid wastes of commerce. Here my cousin and his wife lived with me in winter; I with them at their Lenox home in summer.

A brougham or two at the curb before the house warned me of clients waiting or of visitors for Geraldine—doubtless the latter, for it was now past five.

Under the circumstances I went in to second Geraldine—for Westover never troubled himself to be civil to her friends.

There were people there, and tea—and a pretty, wordless welcome from Geraldine.

The violet-tinted April dusk brought candlelight; people went away and others came; then, one by one, they left, and we were alone, Geraldine and I—and the new moon shining through the frail curtains. For a long time we talked together, aimlessly, of this and that which mattered nothing to anybody. A maid entered to draw the curtains. When she left, Geraldine laughed and picked up a cluster of yellow jonquils.

“Your courage failed you, after all,” she said; “the loveliest woman in the world must go without my flowers to-night.”

“She has them,” I retorted.

“Do you mean me, Dick?” she said under her breath.

“Did you doubt it?”

She bowed her head. Silence, ever waiting to ensnare us, crept like a shadow in between us. And I would not have it.

“An old man is to bring a rug to-night,” I said abruptly.

Geraldine stirred in her armchair, repeating in a low voice:

“Ten thousand thousand stars shine down on Babylon.  
The desert well reflects but one.” Abaddon none.”

Bolt upright in my chair I listened, incredulous of my own ears.

“Where on earth did you hear that?” I demanded.

“I read it on Belshazzar’s Rug in cuneiform with the Kufic key,” she answered, watching me.

“You—all alone—interpreted that?” I asked, astounded. “Yes. It is the cuneiform inscription in the gold cartouche.”

Profound astonishment left me silent. She lay back in her chair with a little laugh of pure excitement.

“After you went out,” she said, “I was horribly lonely, and I thought of you, and then I thought about the work you loved—the cuneiforms—and—as Jim did not seem to need me in the laboratory—I thought to myself: ‘Suppose—suppose by luck I could unravel the inscription on the gold cartouche! Dick would be the happiest man in the world.’ And then—your—your flowers came, and I sat for a while alone with them. Then, on impulse, I jumped up and took the Kufic tables and all the combinations that you and I had tried together, and I slipped upstairs to

the marble room and knelt down before Belshazzar's Rug. O Dick! the Tree of Heaven seemed to quiver in every jeweled branch and leaf—it was only the draught from the closing door that moved the rug, but the mystic tree swayed there as the folds of the carpet moved, and I seemed to feel the mystery of the Prophet's Paradise stealing into me, penetrating me like the incense of forbidden wine—and I—I felt very Eastern and very pagan, kneeling there.

“It was strange, too; the intricate Kufic key seemed to be falling into place of its own impulse, symbol after symbol promising a linked symmetry of sense, until, almost before I was conscious of the miracle, it had been wrought there in the marble room; and my eyes were opened; and I, kneeling before the Tree of Heaven, read quite clearly what is written in the gold cartouche on the great carpet of Belshazzar. Dick! I prayed so hard that I might read it. And I have read it—for *you!*”

In the eloquence of her emotion she had risen, holding out both hands to me; I caught them, crushing them to my lips.

Ominous pulsating silence grew between us; her fingers relaxed and her hands fell from my lips. The stillness, intense, absolute, became a tension, a growing resistless force pressing us apart, slowly, inexorably driving me back step by step against the silk-hung wall, which I reached for, groping, steadying myself.

Never before had we been so swayed, so thrilled; never before had we been so reckless of the peril. Over us a magic snare had fallen, and we had evaded it—an unseen and delicate web, enmeshing us, drawing us together limb to limb, body to body, soul to soul, there on the kindling edges of destruction.

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She sank back into the deep seat by the window, her white hands tightening on the gilded foliage of the chair's carved arms. And I saw how pale her face was and how her dark eyes were fixed steadily upon the floor as though destruction was a pit whose edge lay at her feet.

Presently I became aware that the world outside the curtained windows was moving still—had perhaps never halted on its way to wait upon our fate. And, crossing the room, I raised the shade and saw the new moon, low in the sky, kneeling amid the watching stars. Yellow rays from a street lamp illuminated the old trees' foliage, edging with palest fire the tracery of newborn leaves, tufting each stem and twig, exquisite, delicately formal as the leafy labyrinths of the Tree of Heaven spreading above the flowery field of Belshazzar's Rug.

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Khassar the nomad had come and gone, and his rug hung in the marble room, pale as the tinted shadow cast by the great carpet of Belshazzar.

The nomad's rug was clean but very ancient, and so worn, so time-eaten to the very warp, that the Kherdeh was all but obliterated in the met-nih. But outside of that, between the outside band and the ara, or central line, there were traces of ancient glory and dimmed outlines of design; and I saw the twelve cartouches inscribed alternately in Persian and in cuneiform characters. There, too, were the worn remains of floral thickets haunted of beast and bird, intricate allegories, chronicles in color and symbol, every leaf, every blossom, every creature fraught with mystic meaning; and there also, still faintly to be made out, the shadowy foliage of the Tree of Heaven.

“How much did you pay for that ghost of a rug?” demanded Westover, who had followed me

upstairs after dressing for dinner.

When I told him he shrugged his shoulders, but made no comment. A moment later Geraldine entered, and his small eyes, no longer furtive, became fixed and dull.

“They say in the East,” I remarked, “that when all color is gone from an Eighur rug a lost soul takes it for its abode. Eighur women are supposed to have souls occasionally, and to lose them now and then.”

“There are plenty of lost souls in town,” observed Westover; “no doubt you’ll have your choice of tenants for your carper—or,” he added, staring at space, “if you like I’ll provide you.”

I did not understand his remark, but it left a vaguely sinister impression. Geraldine, standing between us, her white fingers linked behind her, looked up at me very gravely.

“Do you know,” she said, “that I am convinced that I wove that rug some centuries ago?”

“I have no doubt of it,” I replied, smiling.

“Do you doubt it, Jim?” she asked gayly.

He did not reply.

“As a matter of fact,” I said, “it was always believed that a young girl who dared to weave the Tree of Heaven into an Eighur carpet died when her task was ended—her entire physical and spiritual vitality entering into the sacred tree and infusing it with mystic splendor.”

“Oh, I died as you say,” observed Geraldine gravely.

“I don’t see that you infused much physical or spiritual splendor into that rug,” observed Westover.

“I must die again, you know, Jim, and bring all its vanished beauty back,” she said gayly. “Shall I, Dick?—and leave you a priceless carpet as my bequest and monument?”

Westover turned on his heel, fidgeting with his collar. Recently his neck had grown fat behind the ears.

A few moments later dinner was announced.

We lingered late over dinner, I remember. Jim drank heavily—a habit which both Geraldine and I had long since left unnoticed, she shrinking from the sullen rebuff certain to follow even a playful protest, I understanding the utter hopelessness of interference. His mind, already shaken, would one day shatter, and the dreadful price be paid.

As he sat there sousing walnuts in port, in his altered features and swollen hands I seemed to divine something malicious and patient and powerful—that indescribable physical menace one feels in the inert brooding eye of the mentally and spiritually crippled.

When Geraldine rose he stood up unsteadily. After she had gone he lighted a cigar and turned his bloodshot eyes on me.

“Is that wine expensive?” he demanded, pointing to Geraldine’s half-empty glass.

“Rather,” I said.

He picked up the glass, examined it, sniffing at the contents.

“It’s poor claret,” he said. “Taste it. It’s pure poison, I tell you.”

“I’m sorry,” I said indifferently.

Again he sniffed it. “Faugh!” he sneered, and threw it into the fireplace behind him. Then he got on his feet, heavily, muttering to himself and stumbled off through the drawing-room.

For a while I sat there amid the shaded candles, staring at space. But I could not read the future pictured there amid the empty chairs and the flowers, already drooping in each crystal vase.

When at length I roused myself and went upstairs, passing her apartment I heard her singing to herself, and I wondered that she could.

I paused on the gallery stairway to listen; and she could not have heard my footsteps on the

thick deep carpeting, yet she came to the door and opened it, looking up at me where I stood.

“You are going to the marble room. May I come and help you?” she asked sweetly. And as I was silent, she said again: “Let me be happy, won’t you, Dick? Let me be where you are.”

“Have I ever avoided you, Geraldine?”

I descended the steps, she laid her hand lightly on my arm, and together we mounted the stairway toward the gallery.

“I was singing a Hillah tent song when you passed,” she said, “partly because I was lonely, and partly”—she hesitated, looking around at me— “partly because I’ve come to the conclusion, Dick, that I was once at Belshazzar’s feast in Cadimirra—for there’s a great deal of wickedness in me—you’d never believe it, would you?” She smiled at me so innocently, so adorably, that I laughed outright.

“I’ve heard that the maids of Babilu-Ki had a bowing acquaintance with the devil,” I said. “Even an Eighur girl nodded pleasantly to Erlik now and then-according to the chronicles of the Tekrins.”

“Oh, they surely did,” she said. And, “Thank you, Dick,” she added, as we reached the gallery; “when I am an old woman you must help me up the steep places.”

“It is you who help me,” I said lightly.

She stood, resting her arm on the table while I gathered up the mass of papers containing our cuneiform combinations and the Kufic key.

“All that is useless,” she said suddenly. Her manner and smile had altered.

I looked up in surprise, and at the same instant she pushed the papers from beneath my hands.

“The memory of things forgotten centuries ago has returned to me,” she said feverishly. “I am a pagan again. It was Istar who first taught my hands to weave and my fingers to tie the Sehna knot. I wove that carpet; what I have woven there I can read. Why do you laugh? Will you believe me if I translate the mystery of each inscription as easily as I read the gold cartouche? Come; we shall never need those papers again.”

What new caprice was this? She was smiling, almost fixedly, and I thought that there was something in her overflushed face and in the starlike brilliancy of her eyes not quite normal. At the same moment the electric lights in the laboratory went out. Westover was evidently in there. I waited, expecting him to appear, but he did not. Again I reached for the papers, but Geraldine scattered them with a quick sweep of her hand.

“Won’t you believe me? Won’t you let me try?” she repeated almost impatiently.

With a quick movement she bent forward past me and shut off the lights in the gallery where we stood. Another second, and the lights in the marble room broke out fiercely; and there, full in the dazzling glory, I saw the great carpet of Belshazzar hanging, and beside it the Eighur rug—a pallid shadow on the wall.

Geraldine, hands clasped to her scarlet mouth, dark eyes fixed, moved forward slowly, opalescent tints flashing on her smooth bare arms and shoulders, her head a delicate silhouette against the glare.

I followed, pausing at her side, and we stood silently before the miracle, the great folds gently stirring in some unfelt current; and I saw the upper branches of the Tree of Heaven sway, and a thousand leaves, all glistening, quiver and subside.

“One can almost hear the rustling of the leaves,” I whispered.

“I hear more than that,” she murmured. “I hear my soul bidding me good-by.”

She smiled dreamily, turning to the faded Eighur carpet, and stepping back one pace, dropped her left arm, clasping my hand in hers.

“It was I who wove that carpet—I, maid of the Issig-Kul—and it was you, beloved of Hassan, who inspired it.”

“What are you saying, Geraldine?” I began uneasily; “where did you ever hear my name linked with the name of Hassan?”

Her palm was burning hot, her eyes too bright. The fever of caprice possessed her, and her imagination was running riot.

There was a silence, through which a distant sound penetrated—the faint ring of glass somewhere in the laboratory. Westover was tying on his crystal mask.

She heard it, too, and she turned, looking me full in the eyes.

“Dick,” she said, “he has slain my body. My soul is bidding me good-by.”

“It is my own that he is dragging to destruction, not yours,” I muttered.

But she only clasped my hand tighter, the fixed smile stamped on her lips.

“Listen,” she whispered, raising her arm. “This is what is written in the rose cartouche on the Eighur carpet that I made:

‘Roses of Babylon: Ashes of roses in Abaddon.’

Love and its awful penalty, Dick—and the warning I wove, confined in cryptogram! Listen again. The cartouche below was once topaz—for I wove it—I!

‘All Paradise the cost:  
Warp and weft for souls so lost.’

—Mine, Dick, mine! —lost in loving as I loved, centuries since. I have no soul; I have never had any since I lost it then. It is there, tenanting the phantom of an Eighur carpet. Do you not understand? There is my faded monument and refuge—that magic-woven sanctuary—that hiding place from hell!”

Her little feverish fingers tightened convulsively in mine; the color flamed in her cheeks. Suddenly she crushed our clasped hands to her heart, and I felt it leaping madly.

“Geraldine,” I stammered, “what is all this ghastly nonsense? Are you ill?”

“Listen! Listen!” she whispered; “the next cartouche was blue—the lost Persian blue! I know; why should I not know—I who wove it centuries ago? And thus it reads, O thou whom I loved to my destruction-thou whom I love!

‘Time and the Guest  
Shall meet me twice—once East, once West.’

‘Ah, prophetess was I by Istar’s favor—seeing I died for love. Do you not understand, Dick? Time and the Guest!-the Guest is Death—the Guest we all must entertain one day—and I twice—once in the East, once here in the West—here, now!’

“Geraldine, are you mad?” I whispered; “look at me!—turn and look at me, I say!”

But she shivered in my arms, whispering that she was ransoming her soul and mine. A distant sound broke from the laboratory, and we listened.

“Hush, beloved,” she said breathlessly; “the last cartouche is black! And this is written there:

‘Soul, lotus-sealed,

Receive—thy—Paradise—”

Her voice died out; a terrible pallor struck her face; she swayed where she stood, the smile frozen on her bloodless lips.

As I caught her to me, her head fell straight back and her body sank a dead weight in my arms. Then a dreadful thing occurred; the faded ancient tapestry glowed out like a live ember, kindling from end to end, brighter, fiercer, flaming into living fire; and the phantom Tree of Heaven, flashing, superbly jeweled, burst into magnificent florescence.

Blinded, almost stupefied, I staggered back, but the straining cry died in my throat as a voice is strangled in dreadful dreams. Again I strove to shout. The rug, glowing like a living ember, slowly faded before my eyes. Suddenly the last spark went out in a shower of whitening ashes.

Again I strove to cry out: “Jim! Jim!” but my lips stiffened with horror as I listened. For he was somewhere there in the darkness, laughing.

“It was in her wine,” he chuckled—“and I saw her kiss the glass and look at you!—and you, there, staring at nothing! Stare at it now!”

And again: “Do you think I have never watched her?—and you? Now she’s in hell, and we’ll race for her on even terms once more.”

Silence: a low, insane laugh, cut by a report and the crash of glass as he fell, shattering his masked face upon the floor.

After a long while I spoke, listening intently. Then I took up my burden.

And there was no sound save the soft stirring of her silken gown as I bore her through the darkness, my cold lips pressed to hers.

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He has never returned to America, but now that the time has come for me to fulfill my part, I do so, setting down what I know and what occult information I have received in letters from him, of the strange fate which overtook, separately, each and every man present at that farewell dinner at the Lenox Club.

My own fate is stranger still—to record these facts and take my position as his historian and his disciple.