

Tales of MAGIC

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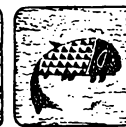
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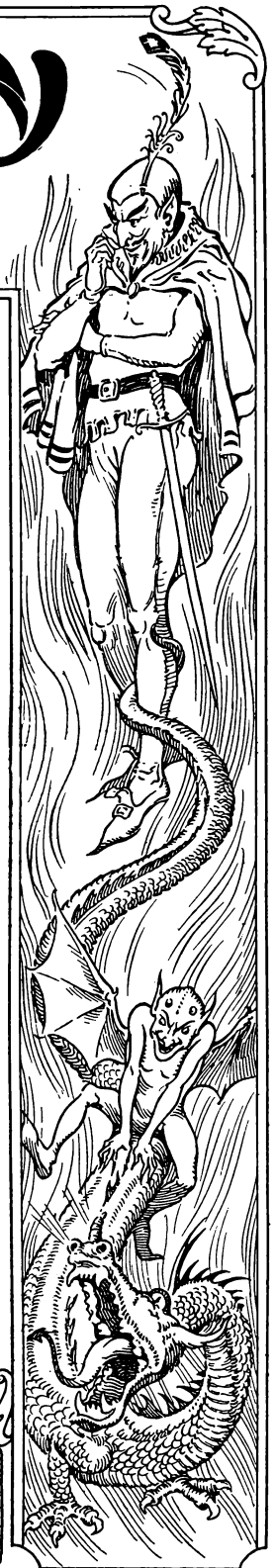
Easy Magic You Can Do 54

A department which regularly each month will explain the presentation and secret of a number of good tricks.

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The Black Well of Wadi



AS I sat sipping iced coffee at the Café de la Bourse on the Place du Gouvernement in Algiers, I suddenly became conscious of Waldo Bernardi sitting directly opposite, despite the fact that I had chosen a table in a far corner among the palms where I might be alone. I was not surprised at his sudden appearance. I accepted it without comment. I did not speak as I sipped my coffee, nor did he. For perhaps half an hour I lingered there in silence. And when I arose to go, he did likewise. Together we went to my rooms at the Hotel d'Orient on the Boulevard de la République.

All evening he remained with me, although I paid scant attention to him. I gave my time to packing, as I had planned a long pilgrimage south, and the morrow would see me off. Perhaps to those not acquainted with Monsieur Bernardi our utter silence would have seemed odd, but in truth it was intentional, for we had confessed to each other that we found silence eloquent. This was the bond that

drew us together—we, who could scarcely term ourselves more than acquaintances; for, excepting the abrupt meeting at the Café, I had chanced upon him but three times in my life, and all three had occurred on the fringe of the desert.

I had intended having several guides and porters along, but at the final moment I changed my mind. I went accompanied solely by Waldo Bernardi.

Not until we were well out in the desert did I observe anything extraordinary about my companion, possibly because until now I had never troubled to study him closely. My first shock of surprise came when I realized that at meals he ate nothing. He sat and toyed with his food but never carried even a morsel to his lips. For three days I watched him in silence, then I commented on his loss of appetite.

He smiled contemptuously. "I do not eat," he said shortly, "because I consider that, for me, it is a waste of time."

But soon the results of his abstinence were re-

By FRANK
O W E N

vealed. His face grew painfully haggard and thin, so thin that his skin was as parchment stretched over a skeleton. I shivered as the simile came



His long fingers, like great white claws, clutched at the wall as he fell

to me, so perfectly did it fit Waldo Bernardi. I felt as though we were walking on the brink of disaster, for it was vividly apparent that Bernardi was dying. Yet he did not complain. On we traveled—endlessly.

Day after day I sat in silence watching him die. There was nothing I could do to help him. I had suggested returning to Algiers but he would not

hear of it. Daily I witnessed the gradual stages of dissolution, and yet the most awful thing about it was that I felt I was observing not so much of bodily illness as the passing of a soul. It is difficult to convey the impression this incident made upon me. All through the nights I would lie awake gazing at his gaunt face, which glistened in the star-glow. I felt as if I were the last man in the last world; as though the earth were deserted save for myself alone; as though the very essence of joy had been parched to ashes by the blinding desert sun and winds. And in those moments I doubted the existence of a supreme being, lost faith in everything except the terrible unescapable doom which is in store for us all.

ONE night as we sat out there in the desert under the star-dotted sky, he told me a fragment of his history.

"Quite some time ago," he said slowly, "I loved a girl as beautiful and fragile as an orchid. We were to marry; but she died, and all happiness and hope went from me. I sought the comfort of barren places; and with only a camel and a few necessities roamed here among the sand dunes. And in the course of my wanderings I

met an old man called Haji. A bit of a wizard, he. To Haji I made known my grief. He replied that were my education complete, I could not mourn the loss of that which is not lost. And when I asked him what he meant, he confided his belief that the desert is the beginning and the end of life. As we are created from dust and unto dust must return—and fur-

ther, that life in the aggregate ——”

Waldo Bernardi paused abruptly. “Perhaps it is unwise to continue,” he reflected, “for the human mind is like a much-used road in which lines of travel are too deeply etched to permit the slightest deviation.”

“Which does not,” I hastened to assure him, “apply to me, for I have lived in the Orient, and the spirit of the Orient is in my blood.”

To this he made no reply, but after a moment of silence resumed: “Through Haji my sight grew so keen that shortly I was able to perceive the forms of souls which hover constantly about us. And one day he gazed into my eyes and said, ‘Go deeper into the desert and you will find her whom you seek.’ And as Haji had spoken, so it came to pass. At the Black Well of Wadi I found Coralie. It was evening when I found her and she was seated

on the sand, facing the East, as though fully expecting me. I wish I were the poet Saadi, that I might tell you of the glory of that night. I prayed to arrest the flight of time—to make each moment a thousand years. But at last Coralie said to me, ‘You must go, though it is only for a little while.’ So I returned to Haji and my heart was lighter than in years.

“The following night Haji again sent me into the vague land that is marked by the Black Well of Wadi. Coralie awaited me as she had the preceding evening. Thus a month passed, and every night, through the influence of Haji, I met her again. My happi-

ness was boundless. And then a great fear attacked me. Suppose Haji should die! Coralie would then be lost to me forever. Haji was eighty years old and very feeble. At best he could live only a few years longer. The fear



Coralie awaited me as she had the preceding evening. My happiness was boundless

grew and made of me a pitiful thing. I spent my time planning a way out. The thought of losing exquisite Coralie at the moment of Haji’s passing horrified me. For it was only through him that I could meet this soul of Coralie, which was even more gorgeous than the body.

“At length I reasoned my way to a solution—ghastly, perhaps, in itself, but to me the only one feasible. And that night, after Haji had woven his delightful spell I persuaded him to accompany me to the rendezvous.

“Upon our arrival at the Black Well of Wadi, Haji leaned over the stone wall which surrounds it and gazed into

the darkness below. In that moment all reason left me. I seized the old man about his waist and pitched him into the Well. He uttered a cry that shattered the web of solitude and echoed weirdly over the desert. His bony fingers, like great white claws, clutched at the wall as he fell, and he somehow managed to grip a projecting rock. But I bent over and clasped my hands about his throat. I released my hold to hear his body strike from rock to rock until it cut the water with a purling splash. But I felt no pity. I had concluded that the only way to keep Coralie with me was to kill Haji while still under his strange influence.

"For a few seconds I stood gazing into the black mouth of the Well; then I turned to take Coralie in my arms, but she was gone. I called many times. No one answered. It was not until I had lain in the sand for hours, raging in grief, that the full horror of what I had done burst upon me. By killing Haji, I had defeated my purpose. With his death, the spell was broken."

WALDO BERNARDI paused in his narrative. His face was white and perspiration stood upon his forehead. He appeared to be suffering profound mental torture.

"Ever since that day," he concluded, "I have searched for Coralie. She is somewhere in this desert, yet I cannot find her."

As he spoke, he closed his eyes. I sat silent, motionless. In the face of his strange confession what could I say? For hours we sat thus, neither stirring. A chill wind sprang from nowhere and whistled eerily across the desert. I shuddered and a great longing for companionship crept over me. I rose to my feet and shook my com-

panion, without response. I shook him again, and then I felt his cheek. It was cold. Not a glimmer of life remained in him. Like a candle, he had just burned out. I stretched him on a rug and began a long, lonely night of watching by his side. In the distance I could hear the howling of wolves and I knew that if I were but to close my eyes they would pounce upon his body. And yet, though I shamefully admit it, just before dawn I must have fallen into a troubled sleep, for the next thing I knew I was sitting up rubbing my eyes to bring memory into focus again. Then with a cry I sprang to my feet. I looked toward the rug upon which Bernardi had lain. The body was gone, nor was there the slightest sign of a wolf anywhere in sight. Gone also was Bernardi's camel. An uncanny chill passed over me.

That morning I decided to abandon my journey. I did not wish to proceed alone. So I returned to the Hotel d' Orient at Algiers, which I reached without further adventure.

The first person I met at the Hotel was Mathews, the manager, and because I yearned for companionship, for some one to talk to, I sat down with him at a secluded table and told him what had befallen in the desert.

When I had finished, he smiled unbelievably. "Old man," he said, "I think you have got a touch of sun. I suggest that you take a good dose of quinine and stay in bed for a week. Waldo Bernardi died more than three years ago. A caravan en route to the Soudan found his body one morning out in the desert. Before the Arabs continued on their way they buried him beneath a great palm tree in an oasis near the Black Well of Wadi."

And thus ended the incident of the man Bernardi.

