

# Weird Tales

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# The GIRL from SAMARCAND

by E. HOFFMANN PRICE



"You are lovelier now than you were then, by that fountain in a garden near Samarcand."

**A**S HER guest set the dainty bone china cup on the onyx-topped, teak tabouret and sank back among the embroidered cushions, Diane knew to the syllable the words which were to filter forth with the next breath of smoke; for three years as Hammersmith Clarke's wife had convinced her that that remark was inevitable.

"My dear, where did you ever get those perfectly gorgeous rugs?"

And Diane, true to form, smiled ever so faintly, and luxuriated in the suspicion of a yawn: the ennui of an odalisk hardened to the magnificence of a seraglio carpeted with an ancient Feraghan rug, and hung with

silken witcheries from the looms of Kashan. Diane saw the wonder permeate her friend's soul and heard it surge into words.

"The rugs? Why—well, I married them along with Ham, you might say. Yes, they are rather pretty, aren't they? But they're an awful pest at times——"

"Naturally," agreed Louise, who lived in a loft in the Pontalba Building, where she could look down into the Plaza where Jackson reins in his brazen horse and lifts his brazen hat in salutation to the French Quarter of New Orleans. "You simply couldn't let the maid clean——"

"Maid? Lord help us, but I daren't

touch them myself! I tried it, once. That heaven-sent prayer-rug"—Diane indicated an ancient Ghiordes, a sea-green splendor worth more than his right eye to any collector—"looked a bit dingy. And Ham caught me at it. What was left of my hair just fell short of a close shingle. Do you know, one day I caught him filling the bathtub with milk——"

"What?"

"Precisely. Seems some expert claimed a milk bath improves the luster. So the little Bokhara—that blood-red creature beneath your feet—got a treatment fit for a Circassian beauty. I'm just waiting for him to bring home a duster of bird-of-paradise plumes for this venerable wreck."

Diane stroked what was left of the peachblow, sapphire and gold nap of an age-old Senna woven on a silken warp.

"The truth of it is," continued Diane, "I feel guilty of bigamy. The man was married to his rugs long before he ever met me. 'Member how we speculated on the pros and cons of polygamy the other day at Arnaud's? Well, here I am, one lone woman competing with a dozen odd favorites, and a new rival added to the harem every so often."

"Good lord, Diane, what next! You are unique. Why, one would think you were jealous of them."

"Well, I am!"

"Outlandish as that fantastic husband of yours. I don't know which is the more *outré*, his mania for these beautiful things with the impossible names, or your—heavens above, it does really seem like resentment against them. Now, if you'd married Peter"—Louise laughed metallically—"he'd never have given you time to be jealous of a *rug*."

"That's just it," flared Diane. "I could forgive flirtations and black eyes, and a reasonable degree of non-support. But these damned rugs—look at that!"

Diane dug her cobraskin toe into

the closely worn nap of the Feraghan carpet.

"Look at it! Just a rug, the first time. But live with it day after day. See the witchery sparkling in it at sunset. Catch yourself losing yourself in the thrill of its three hundred years, wondering that all the ecstasy ever lost in the entire world could be imprisoned in a rug. Then see your one and only and otherwise adequate husband sitting of an evening, hours at a stretch, staring at it and dreaming of all the richness and glamor he's lost through becoming civilized, learning to wear shoes, and having only one woman, and she his wife, about the house. Yes, I called you up to have you listen to me get the indignation out of my soul. The truth of it is, Lou, that if I don't get out of this atmosphere soon, I'll go utterly mad. Some day I'm going to move in on you in your attic—anything to get away from all this!"

"Do you mean to say," began Louise with wide-spaced deliberation, "that you'd actually leave Ham because he likes to mess and poke around with his rugs, and spend most of his waking moments talking about them? Honestly, now——"

"Good Lord, I could stand his *talking* about them. But"—Diane shuddered—"Lou, he *loves* them. Sits there, transfigured, like a saint contemplating the dewdrop glistening in the lotus cup."

"When I suggested, over at the Iron Gate, that you move in with me, I didn't know that you were married—they all called you *la belle Livaudaise*, and you were the life of everything—and least of all, I never suspected anyone had you enshrined in magnificence like this. Better think it over, Di—I've been through the mill, and I *know*."

**D**IANE from the first had been fascinated by the exotic atmosphere in which Clarke had planted her after their marriage; but in the end, seeing

how they had become a part of him, she half consciously hated them and their everlasting song of Bokhara and Herat of the Hundred Gardens: an unheard song to which Clarke listened, and replied in unspoken syllables. And thus it was that Diane learned that to live in Clarke's apartment would be to become an accessory to those precious fabrics that were his hard-riden hobby; for no woman would fit into the dim, smoky shadows of that titled salon unless bejeweled and diaphanously veiled she could dance with curious paces and gestures beneath the sullen glow of the great brazen mosque lamp as became the favorite of a khan in far-off Tartary. From the very beginning, Diane fought to keep her individuality untainted by the overwhelming personality of those damnably lovely fabrics from Shiraz and the dusty plains of Feraghan.

And Diane was right; for they dreamed, those old weavers, of the roses of Kirman, of the evening star that danced on the crest of Mount Zagros, of dancing girls in the gardens of Naishapur, of fountains that sprayed mistily in the moonlit valley of Zarab-shan; and all this they wove into what we now learn to catalogue as Sixteenth Century Persian, or whatever our best guess may be. Into his masterwork the weaver wove his soul; so that whoever lives with one of those imperishable sorceries that come out of the East must in the end feel its presence unless he be somewhat duller than the very wood of the loom on which it was woven.

Look upon wine as often as you wish, but beware of a Bokhara when it is red—red as the blood of slaughter—red as the embers of a plundered city—a redness charged with the quartered octagons of Turkestan—for in the end you will become enslaved to the silky splendor that once graced the tent floor of a Tekke prince. . . .

Diane was right; though Diane never suspected, even dimly, what in

the end really did happen to Hammersmith Clarke. For, naturally enough, neither she nor anyone else saw or heard the Yellow Girl; that is, no one but Clarke: and he saw and heard too much.

Had she suspected—but she couldn't have. For who would imagine Fate riding to the crossroads in a truck of the American Express Company? It just isn't done; not until one looks back and sees that it could have happened in no other way.

But unheard-of things happen in Turkestan; and while one may pause for an evening's glamor beside some moon-kissed fountain in the valley of Zarab-shan, and then march on, forgetting, there is that which does not forget, being undying and everlasting; so that though forgotten, it reaches forth across time and space, not only clinging to the pile of a rug from Samarcand, but resorting even to express trucks to carry it the last step toward capturing the forgetful one. . . .

All this Diane knew without knowing why she knew: and it seemed so reasonable that there was nothing incongruous in shuddering and saying as she often had, "I'm afraid of the damned things. . . ."

AS THE door clicked behind the departing expressman, Clarke clipped the leaden seals of the cylindrical bale, cut its stitching, and thrilled at the thought of the rug he was about to unwrap; for the bale was from Siraganian of New York, who by dint of persistent reaching into the East must finally have succeeded in executing Clarke's impossible order.

A tawny, golden silkiness smiled from the gaping burlap sheath.

Just a glimpse of that wonder in buff and cream, with its lotus-bud border, and frets and meanders in blue and coral and peach, told Clarke that this of all things was as far as possible from what he had ordered

Siraganian to get, cost what it might. For in place of Persian intricacies in deep wine reds and solemn green, florid magnificence that Ispahan had given to the world before the splendor died, Clarke was confronted by an ancient rug from Samarcand—silken Samarcand in the valley of Zarabshah—thick-napped and luxurious, mysterious with its Mongolian cloud bands and asymmetrical corner pieces, bats and dragons, and five-medallioned firmaments of blue that could come from none but the vats of Turkistan.

“Good God! It’s silk!” marveled Clarke as he stroked the lustrous pile. “Silk, and by the Rod, on a linen warp!”

He wondered how Siraganian could have made that incredible mistake, sending him such a rug in place of what he had ordered. If it were a case of sending something just as good—an unheard-of procedure with that Armenian merchant-prince—he certainly had been crafty enough, for no connoisseur who once touched that rich pile, whose eyes were once dazzled by those insinuant colors, whose senses were stricken by the sorcery of cabalistical designs, could ever return it and say that he had ordered something else. Rather would he thank Siraganian for his error.

A silk pile on a warp of blue linen, and woven in the days when Persian Hafiz was called to account by that fierce Mongol for a verse wherein the poet bartered the prince’s favorite cities, Samarcand and Bokhara, for the smile of a *Turki* dancing girl, and the mole on her left breast: unbelievable fortune had sent him this incredible rug.

And then Clarke’s wondering, triumphant eyes clouded as he thought of a girl beside whom Samarcand and Bokhara were but the tinkle of brazen anklets—a very long time ago, when there was no Diane, when Clarke pursued rugs for that same Siraganian who now sought them for Clarke.

“*Egher an Turki bedest ared dili mara,*” muttered Clarke, forgetting all but the glamorous perils that had lured him far into lost cities and high adventure. Hafiz was right.

And for a moment the rug from Samarcand, its five by seven feet of tawny, silken perfection putting to confusion the priceless Feraghan on which it had been unrolled, gleamed unregarded as Clarke’s mind whirled to the sonorous accent with which the divine Hafiz had enslaved the East and its savage conquerors.

“*Egher an Turki*——”

Strange, how after all this time one would remember. It must be that one could never quite forget.

The telephone rang; but Clarke ignored it until the jangling became too insistent, when he muffled the bell with several towels and a small cushion.

“Too bad,” he apologized, as he took the cord from his lounge robe and completed the throttling of the almost stifled annoyance, “but I simply can’t be disturbed.”

In which he was wrong: for to contemplate that wonder from Samarcand was more disturbing than any voice that could creep in over the wire. He fingered the rings of dull, hand-hammered gold that were sewed to one of the selvaged sides; he wondered what palace wall had been enriched by that precious fabric—and with it all came the knowledge that that very rug had been a part of his own past. The life that had been knotted into its pile and the sorcery that had been woven into its pattern were speaking to one of Clarke’s forgotten selves. Yet he was certain that he had never before seen it; for one could never have forgotten such as this, though seen but for an instant. Truly, the *rug* was a stranger, but the presence that accompanied it was demanding recognition.

In the meanwhile, Diane tired of hearing the operator’s “They don’t

answer," and abandoned her efforts to remind Clarke of an engagement.

"I wonder," she mused, as she finally set aside the useless telephone, "what deviltry my *bien aimé* is devising."

And then she sought the rendezvous unattended, and made the customary apologies for Clarke's unaccountable absence.

He might have retreated into that dusky inner kingdom which from the very beginning he had held against Diane—a silence into which he plunged unaccompanied, not lacking appreciative company, but rather loving solitude and electing seclusion rather than the sharing of the fancies that twisted and the thoughts that writhed in his strange brain.

As Diane made her well-rehearsed apologies and frothed behind her vivacious mask, Clarke noted the manila envelope that was fastened to the web of the rug from Samarcand, and addressed to him: a letter, doubtless from Siraganian.

"We regret," wrote the Armenian, "that thus far we have had no success in finding at any cost a rug of the weave you ordered. However, we take pleasure in forwarding you this rug which a caravan stopping at Meshed left with our agent in that city with instructions to forward it to our New York office and thence to you. We are pleased that your agent saw fit to use our facilities for forwarding it to you, and wish to congratulate you on having obtained such a priceless specimen. Should you at any time care to dispose of it, be so kind as to give us an option on it, for we are in a position to offer you a better price than any dealer or collector in the United States. . . ."

The rug itself was improbable enough—but Siraganian's letter! An insoluble riddle. It couldn't be a jest. Then who—?

True enough, Colonel Merbere's expedition must have passed through Samarcand, Yarkand, and Kashgar

on its way into the unknown stretches of Chinese Turkestan; but his acquaintance with the colonel was slight, and he had no friend in the colonel's train. And what obscure acquaintance of the "wish you were here" postal-card banality would send a rug which in the old days served as a gift from one prince to another?

Diane's arrival cut the thread of fancy.

"Oh, Ham, but it is gorgeous," enthused *la belle Livaudaise* as she entered the roseate duskiness of Clarke's studio. And to herself, "Another rival. . . ."

Then she rehearsed the excuses she had offered for Ham's absence, and hoped he'd absent-mindedly contradict her the first time he deigned to speak for himself. That done, one must consider the latest addition to the seraglio.

Clarke detailed the story of the rug and its riddle.

"But who in the world would send you such a gift," wondered Diane.

"Exactly no one, *très chère*."

"Unless," Diane pointed out, "it might be one of your lost loves in those Asiatic playgrounds you've never entirely left."

Clarke laughed, but his derision was unconvincing, and Diane knew that he had been deep in the blacknesses of Asian nights; knew that her arrival had been an intrusion, that he was but a friendly stranger, babbling to her, a friendly stranger, of loveliness whose intoxication forced him to speak of it to anyone, even her.

The others were bad enough, with their everlasting song of Bokhara, and Herat of the Hundred Gardens—an unheard song to which Clarke listened, and replied in unspoken syllables; they were bad enough, they, and those monstrous fancies which at times he smilingly expressed with deliberate vagueness, but this yellow witch from Samarcand—

**D**IANE knew that more than a rug had emerged from that bale whose burlap winding-sheet still littered the floor.

At last it seemed that she was intruding on a *tête-à-tête*, eavesdropping on a monologue; so that when Clarke would emerge from his reveries, Diane resented the inevitable thought that he was robbing himself to keep her company. But patience reaches its limit, finally. . . .

She saw it, one night, twinkle and smile through a lustrous haze that played over its surface, smile the slow, curved smile of a carmine-lipped woman through the veils of her mystery; saw Clarke sitting there, eyes shearing the veil and half smiling in return, a devotee in the ecstatic contemplation of a goddess shrouded in altar fumes. . . .

"Hiam!"

"Yes," answered Clarke's lips. He had now perfected the trick of having his body act as his proxy.

"Are you taking me to that show tonight?"

"What show?" Clarke the simulacrum stirred lazily in the depths of the cushion-heaped lounge. "The truth of it is, my dear," he resumed after a pause during which some memory of the proposed entertainment must have returned, "truth of it is I'm awfully busy tonight——"

"Busy sitting there staring at nothing and sipping Pernod!" flared Diane, the wrath of months flashing forth. Then, as she saw Clarke settle back into the depths: "Listen, once for all: this nonsense has lasted too long. I might as well have married a mummy! Either get that thing out of the house, or I'll leave you to your pious meditations indefinitely——"

"What? Good Lord, Diane, what's this?"

"You heard me. You used to be half human, but now you're utterly impossible. And if you can't show me a little attention, I'm leaving here and now. For the past many weeks

you've acted like a model for a petrified forest. Ever since that yellow beast——"

"Yellow beast?"

"Exactly! That damned rug is driving me crazy——"

"Is, or has driven?" suggested Clarke.

"Lies there like a beast of prey just ready to wake. And you sit there, night after night, staring at it until you fall asleep in your chair. Does it go, or do I?"

"What do you want me to do? Throw it away?"

"I don't care what you do with it. Only I won't stay in the house with it. It gives me the creeps. You've said entirely too much in your sleep lately—first yellow rugs, and now it's a yellow girl. I'm through!"

Clarke's brows rose in Saracenic arches. And then he smiled with surprising friendliness and a touch of wonder.

"Di, why didn't you tell me sooner? I could understand your craving alligator pears at 3 in the morning—I might have understood that, but hating a rug is really a new one on me——"

"No, stupid, it's nothing like that! I just hate the damned thing, and no more to be said."

"Well, lacking the infallible alibi" —Clarke glared and assumed his fighting face—"if you mean I choose between you and the rug, I'll call a taxi right now."

"Don't bother. I'll walk."

The door slammed.

Clarke twisted his mustache, and achieved a laugh; not merry, but still a laugh. And then he sank back among the cushions.

"Yellow Girl, I thought *you* were fantastic. . . ."

**L**E VIEUX CARRE wondered when the next morning it was rumored that *la belle Livaudaise* had been seen hurrying down Saint Peter Street without speaking to any one of the



several acquaintances she had met; but when at the Green Shutter and the Old Quarter Bookstore it was announced that Diane was living in a loft of the Pontalba Building, wonder ceased. For Diane's friend Louise had been no less garrulous than she should have been, so that the habitués of the French Quarter were prepared for the news.

And then it was said that to gain admittance to Clarke's studio one must know the code of taps whereby someone who at times left a certain side door bearing bottles of Pernod announced his arrival; for Clarke answered neither doorbell nor telephone. The vendor of Pernod was certainly a discreet person; yet even a discreet seller of absinthe could see no harm in mentioning that his patron found enormous fascination in watching the play of sunlight and the dance of moonbeams on the golden buff pile of a rug that was more a sleeping, breathing creature than any sane child of the loom.

Finally the courier failed to gain admittance, despite his tapping in code. And this he thought worthy of Diane's ear.

"He starves himself, *petite*—since three days now he has not admitted me. All the while she lies there, gleaming in the moon, that awful rug—*mordieu*, it is terrible. . . ."

Diane had steadfastly denied that which had been clamoring for recognition. But when this last bit was added to what had gone before, logic gave way, and Diane's fears asserted themselves. That rug *was* haunted, *was* bewitched, *was* bedevilling Clarke; logic or no logic, the fact was plain.

Driven by that monstrous thought, Diane exhumed the little golden key-ring and started up Royal Street, determined to cross the barrier before it became impassable. But her determination wavered; and before fitting the well worn key into the lock, she applied her ear to the keyhole, listened, and heard Clarke's voice.

Diane resisted the temptation to use her key and stage a scene that even in the imperturbable Vieux Carré would be sensational for at least a week. Then her pride conquered, and she achieved a most credible smile of disdain.

"Sly devil, pretending it was a rug he was so absorbed in. . . ."

And, since it was but an amorous escapade, Diane's unbelievable speculations were replaced by thoughts reasonable enough not to be terrifying.

THAT very night, Clarke was sitting cross-legged on the floor of his studio, full under the red glow of a tall bronze mosque lamp. Before him, shimmering in the moonlight that streamed in through the French windows, lay the rug from Samarcand, mysterious and golden, with its pale sapphire corner pieces glittering like a distant sea viewed through a cleft between two mountain crests.

All the witchery and ecstasy that had ever been lost in the entire world were reassembled, pulsing in the silken pile which he contemplated. And this was *the* night; the Night of Power, when Fate stalked through the corridors of the world like a colossus just risen from an age-old throne of granite, resistless and unconquerable. Clarke had spent so many nights and days of staring that it was inevitable that there must be such a night. He saw more than the wonder before him: in place of the marvel woven by deft, forgotten hands, there gleamed enchantingly as through moon-touched mist a garden in the valley of Zarab-shan.

Then came a faint, oddly accented drumming and piping, music to whose tune dead years reassembled their bones and danced forth from their graves. And their ghosts as they danced exhaled an overwhelming sweetness that made Clarke's brain reel and glow, and his blood surge madly in

anticipation of that which he knew must follow.

Then out of the blackness just beyond the range of the ruddy mosque lamp and full into the moonlight that marched slowly across the rug came a slim Yellow Girl, diaphanously garbed and veiled. Her anklets clicked faintly; and very faint was the tinkle of the pendant that adorned her unusual coiffure.

"All these many days I have sought you, my lord," she began, as she extended her arms in welcome. "But in vain, until tonight, when at last I parted the veil and crossed the Border."

Clarke nodded understandingly, and looked full into her dark, faintly slanted eyes.

"And I have been thinking of you," he began, "ever since someone sent me this rug on which you stand. It is strange how this rug could bridge the gap of twenty years and bring into my very house a glimpse of the valley of Zarab-shan. And stranger yet that you could escape from your father's house and find me here. Though strangest of all, time has not touched you, when by all reason you should be old, and leathery, and past forty. . . . Yet you are lovelier now than you were then, by that fountain in a garden near Samarcand."

"It is not strange," contradicted the Yellow Girl, as she pirouetted with dainty feet across the moon-lapped silk. "For you see me now as I was when I wove my soul into this very rug."

Clarke smiled incredulously: which was illogical enough, since, compared with the girl's presence, nothing else should be incredible.

"How can that be, Yellow Girl, seeing that we two met one evening twenty years ago, whereas this rug was woven when the Great Khan sat enthroned in Samarcand and reproved the Persian Hafiz for his careless disposal of the Great Khan's favorite cities. This was the joy of kings hun-

dreds of years before you and I were born——"

"Before the *last* time we were born," corrected the Yellow Girl. "But the first time—at least, the first time that I can recollect—the barred windows of a prince's palace failed to keep you from me. And eunuchs with crescent-bladed simitars likewise failed. But in the end—why must all loveliness have an end?—a bowstring for me, and a swordstroke for you. . . ."

The Yellow Girl shuddered as she stroked her smooth throat with fingers that sought to wipe off the last lingering memory of a cord of hard-spun silk.

"And from the first," continued the girl, "I knew what our doom would be. So I started weaving, and completed my task before they suspected us and the bowstring did its work. My soul, my self, being woven cunningly and curiously into silk rich enough to hang on the wall of the khan's palace, waited patiently and wondered whether you and I could have our day again. Thus it was in the beginning——"

"Ah . . . now it does come back to me," interrupted Clarke, "as in a dream dimly remembered. How compactly and stifflingly they would wrap me in a bale of silk and carry me past the guards and into your presence. And by what devious routes I would leave you . . . yes, and how painlessly swift is the stroke of a simitar. . . ."

The Yellow Girl shuddered.

"A simitar truly wielded is really nothing, after all," continued Clarke. "I might have been sawn asunder between planks. . . . Well, and that meeting in the garden these short twenty years ago was after all not our first . . . it seems that I knew then that it was not the first. Though but for an evening——"

"Yes. Just for an evening. So to what end were we spared bowstrings and the stroke of swift simitars, since

we had but an evening?" And thinking of the empty years of luxurious imprisonment that followed, she smiled somberly. "For only an evening. And then you forgot, until this rug—this same rug I wove centuries ago—interrupted your pleasant adventuring, and reminded you.

"Death stared me in the face. The end of life more vainly lived than the first. I knew that I was leaving this avatar after having lived but one stolen evening. So I sent a trusted servant to carry this very rug to Meshed. For when we met in the garden, you were hunting rugs for him who now seeks them for your delight. And I knew that he would find you if you still lived. Thus it is that I have crossed the Border, and stand before you as I did once before—this time on that very rug which I wove centuries ago, while living in hope of another meeting and in dread of the bowstring I knew would in the end find me."

The moon patch had marched toward the end of the rug from Samarcand, and was cutting into the blue web at its end. Clarke knew that when there remained no more room for her tiny feet, she would vanish, not ever to reappear. But Clarke hoped against knowledge.

"Yellow Girl," he entreated, "my door will be barred to friend and acquaintance alike, if you will but return on whatever nights the moon creeps across our rug. . . ."

Had Diane, listening at the door, understood, she would have used her key. But Diane merely heard:

"And I shall wait for these nights as long as life remains in me. For all that has happened since then is noth-

ing and less than nothing; and all has been a dream since that one night in a garden of Zarab-shan."

Very little remained of the moon patch. The Yellow Girl stepped a tiny pace forward, to prolong her stay yet another few moments. All but the moonlit strip of the rug from Samarcand glowed bloodily in the flare of the brazen mosque lamp.

"No, forgetful lover," chided the Yellow Girl, "I can not return. I can not cross the Border again. In Samarcand, eight hundred years ago we mocked for a while the doom that hung over us, and in the end called the bowstring but a caress of farewell. Again, in the garden of Zarab-shan we met, we parted, and you forgot: so this time I take no chances. While I can not return, you at least can follow me . . . if you will . . . for it is very easy. . . ."

She edged along the ever narrowing strip of moon-bathed silk, and with an embracing gesture, lured Clarke to rise and follow her.

"It is so easy . . . move lightly . . . but be careful not to disturb your body or overbalance it. . . ."

Had Diane not turned away from the door; were she not even now strolling insouciantly down Royal Street—

"Yellow Girl, you and I have had enough of farewells!"

Something left Clarke, tottered perilously on the two handbreadths of moonlight that remained, then caught the Yellow Girl by the hand and took the lead.

The blue web of the rug from Samarcand gleamed for another moment in the moonlight, then sweltered in the red glow of the mosque lamp.

