

THE MAGIC CARPET MAGAZINE




Registered in U. S. Patent Office.

Volume 4

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Published quarterly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter, September 8, 1930, at the postoffice at Indianapolis, Indiana, under Act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$1.00 a year in the United States, \$1.40 a year in Canada, \$1.20 in other countries. English office: Charles Lavell, 13, Serjeant's Inn, Fleet St., E. C. 4, London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers. All manuscripts and communications should be addressed to the publishers' Chicago office at 540 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Ill. FARNSWORTH WRUGHT, Editor.

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The Mayor's Four Chins

By JAMES W. BENNETT

THE French commercial traveler and I had each been drawn to Soerabaya by the *jaarmart*. I had heard that the palace dancers of the Sultan of Jolo would perform at the fair. He had come to pick over the sarongs for sale there to send back samples to the design department of his Lyons silk factory. Several times that day at the *jaarmart* I had run across him chaffering with anxious Javanese women over some hand-worked bit of batik that had taken a year in fabricating. And once, as I was about to close a purchase of a souvenir sarong I found him peering under my arm (for he was not more than five feet tall) and shaking his head. In a whisper, he informed me that the batik I was considering had been made, not in Djocokarta in a peasant's hut, but in Manchester, England.

That evening at the hotel I ran across him again and invited him to have a gin *pabit* with me. He seated himself with a pleased smile at my offer but abstemiously ordered only Perrier water. His name, he told me, was Jaccquard.

As we were sipping our drinks a woman approached. Monsieur Jaccquard said to me in rapid French:

"It is a countrywoman of mine. For the living, she sings and makes the naughty little dance. She is most lonely here—may I ask her to join us?"

"Of course."

Monsieur Jaccquard beckoned to her and drew up a third chair. Her name, I was informed, was Mademoiselle Pauline.

The woman threw herself down with a flounce of dingy skirts, sighed, muttered a succession of *Mon Dieux* and demanded champagne. Monsieur Jaccquard started, a pained look came into his eyes; then gallantly he signaled to a mournful Javanese bar boy.

Sipping her wine, the woman gave me an ogling look over the rim of her glass and said in English:

"You are Amerrrrricain, *hein?*" Then, without giving me time to agree, she went on: "I s'ink Amerrrrricains are vary, vary nize." She took another sip, set down her glass, sighed again, and with a complete change of tone she said: "Eet ces 'ard! I haf not the license. Any time now, the polis' will come down on me lak zat!"

"Zat" was the slap of a palm, none too clean, on the bamboo table before her.

"But why don't you get a license?" I asked.

"Ah, *ciel!* And w'y don' I?"

She looked at the chubby little *commis voyageur*.

Monsieur Jaccquard shook his head sympathetically.

"I know. You haf not the money. License is too high. It is rrrruinous! But w'at will you do?"

Mademoiselle Pauline shrugged.

"I weel seeng an' dance here as long as they let me. Then I weel go to Singapore. If I were not so damn' virrrrtuous I could get license frrree! By staying wiz the Dutch *mairie*—'ow you say——?"

"The mayor?" I supplied.

"*Oui!* But 'e is lak a grrreat peeg! Wiz 'is little blue eyes! And w'at I don't lak most 'bout 'im is 'is chin! 'E 'as t'ree—no, four—chin!"

As Mademoiselle Pauline spat out a thoroughly uncomplimentary description of the Burgomaster of Soerabaya, the thought crossed my mind that she was

typically low-caste French—a combination of peasant and gamine. The chin was thin and pointed. The eyes were hollow, weary yet incessantly active. Her thin legs—carelessly displayed at times well above the knee—were encased in sheer beige silk hose that ended in blue-toed slippers exaggeratedly high in the arch and heel. Her hips were pure peasant, unusually broad. In age, she must have been between forty and fifty.

As the talk went on, sometimes in French, sometimes in English, I learned that she was staying at the hotel. I wondered how—since she hadn't the necessary gulden to pay a dancer's license—she managed to remain here. *I* was finding the tariff exorbitant!

After a time I excused myself and went to my room. I was thoroughly weary after the heat and the dust of my day at the *jaarmart*.

I undressed slowly, killed a scorpion that was endeavoring to roost for the night in one of my shoes, then stood at the open window in the oppressive tropic blackness, longing for a touch of breeze. But none came. I lifted the mosquito curtain of my bed and yanked out that long devilish bolster of Malaysia, known as a "Dutch Wife," which if clasped to one's bosom while asleep is said to be a prime cholera preventive. I preferred the risk of cholera to the heat of that attenuated feather pillow.

At this moment, a soft apologetic knock sounded at my door.

"Come in," I said.

THE door opened. Into my room I walked the French commercial traveler. Monsieur Jaccquard's face, I saw, was peculiarly puckered. There were traces of tears on his chubby cheeks. He

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stood for a moment in silence, his throat working; then he blurted out:

"I mus' in honor ask you queer question. Would you lak a nize *bonne amie* tonight? A littl' frien'? Somesing better zan zat!"

The toe of his canvas oxford touched the Dutch Wife that was plumped on the floor.

"What *are* you talking about?"

He seemed slightly dashed by my question, but, gulping again, he persevered:

"Mademoiselle Pauline, wiz whom you drrank the littl' wine tonight, is in grrreat troubl'. Jus' after you leave us, the manager of her cabaret telephone that polis' have come and demand' a license. One hundred gulden. The Mayor have say to her that he weel feex cct up—if she weel come an' live wiz him. But he is terrible man! By Gods, he weel brrreak her *esprit!* She say she weel die firs'! She say she weel keel herself tonight! I have beg her not to! An' I have give' her fifty gulden—which is all the money I can spare; for me, it is mos' large. But you—you do not have the same tie of *la patrie*. You can not be expect' to give. So, to you she make offer. She weel stay wiz you tonight—for the ozzer fifty gulden which she mus' have."

"I see," I said a trifle maliciously. "The lady is going to share her—her charms between us? Is that to be the arrangement?"

He gave me a quick hurt look.

"But, no. You do not understan'. I— I am *père de famille*: father wiz wife an' sev'n children. To my wife I am mos' true. All-ways."

Monsieur Jaccquard, I realized, was in deadly earnest. The truth, I saw, was to be handled with gloves. Were I to tell him the plain facts—that this wretched tramp of a woman held not a scintilla of

appeal for me—he would be hurt. It was evident that he considered she was doing me an inordinate favor. Yet, I was touched by his eagerness to help her. Perhaps he was right; perhaps, in despair, she would kill herself—although she had said that if the police threatened her she would move on to Singapore. On impulse I thrust my hand under the mosquito bar, lifted my pillow, drew out my billfold and extracted fifty gulden. I said slowly to Monsieur Jaccquard:

"Tell Mademoiselle that I am honored by her offer but that under the circumstances I can not be considered less generous than you. You will give her this and explain that I wish no payment."

He suddenly sputtered in French:

"But perhaps she will not take this gift from you. You are not French. And she is proud, that one! She may not wish to be in your debt!"

"Nonsense! Tell her—oh, tell her that, like you, I am also the father of a family."

He looked at me uncertainly.

"But I had the understanding that you were the bachelor."

"That was a mistake on your part. I have—uh—I have eight children."

Monsieur Jaccquard gave me a shrewd glance; there was a glint in his limpid blue eye. He reverted again to English:

"You mus' have marry vary, vary young! . . . But I understan'. You are nize fellow! One of the bes'! An' tonight, believe me, you have save' a life!"

I DID not again see Mademoiselle Pauline in Soerabaya, although I was informed by my Lyonnais friend, the next morning, that she had made her peace with the police and had thus been able to spurn the unwelcome advances of the Mayor-with-the-four-chins. We departed, the next afternoon, Monsieur Jaccquard

for Batavia, and I direct to Singapore. Our farewells were made with many expressions of mutual esteem. . . .

A month later, I was taken to a Singapore *café chantant* by an English friend, a rubber planter. We had hardly seated ourselves before there appeared on the dance floor—in an energetic whirl of skirts—Mademoiselle Pauline. The spotlight was in her eyes and she did not recognize me. In her broken English she sang an exceedingly bawdy song and then did an equally bawdy can-can.

My English companion gave a snort.

"So that's the famous Pauline, is it? Well, if you ask me, she can't sing and she can't dance. I suppose she's getting by on her notoriety."

"What notoriety?" I asked sharply.

"Why, that scandal, over in Soerabaya. The way she hooked the Mayor of that town was—as you Americans say—nobody's business! Poor devil, she leeches him for thousands! She dangled him on a string for about a year. Last month, they found that he had been peculating funds—to spend on her. They jailed him. But they couldn't pin anything on her. Things got a little warm for her there, so she levanted, came over here."

Again Mademoiselle Pauline came on and danced—a forced encore, for the applause following her first effort had been almost conspicuous by its absence. This time, she looked me squarely in the eye. It was a bland look, completely unrecognizing. I might have been a bit of the rather garish decoration on the wall back of me. . . . I made no effort to jog her failing memory. . . .

Nevertheless, I decided that, were I ever fortunate enough to run into him, I would give Monsieur Jacquard a piece of my mind. In fact, I was in the mood to add assault and battery to my argument.

I had that good fortune, the very next

afternoon. I heard a delighted voice chirruping at me from across the foyer of the Hotel de l'Europe:

"Allo! Allo! Allo! Cheerheeo, my frien'! I ahm glad to see you again!"

Monsieur Jaccquard grasped my hand, beamed at me and rushed on, without giving me a chance to get a word in edgewise.

"Tonight I leave for Marseilles. An' I ahm all—how you say?—all set to tell my wife 'bout you. My wife not lak Americans; she say you are Shylockers. But w'en I tell her how you help zat poor countrywoman of mine, why, by Gods, she never will dare say it again!"

I gave Monsieur Jaccquard a sour, suspecting look. But the eyes that looked into mine were limpid and blue, absolutely guileless. I put a sudden, sharp clamp on my tongue. I knew now that as far as he was concerned my suspicions were unfounded. He had not been implicated in Mademoiselle Pauline's adroit "touch." . . .

After all, we had been lucky, Monsieur Jaccquard and I. The Mayor of Soerabaya was in jail!
