

Oriental STORIES

Published quarterly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter September 2, 1916, at the postoffice at Indianapolis, Indiana, under Act of March 3, 1915. Single copies, 15 cents. Subscriptions, \$1.00 a year in the United States, \$1.45 a year in Canada, \$1.50 in other countries. English office: Charles Lavell, 12, St. James'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 publisher's Chicago office at 448 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Ill. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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THE SNARE

By ARREPH EL-KHOURY

Hammad returned from his pilgrimage to Mecca, only to find himself mulcted of his money

BEHIND the little desk in the office that overlooked the inner courtyard of the Inn of the Seven Simitars, Madam Azuri sat giving orders like a dowager sultana, while in the courtyard the dust was surging in overlapping clouds. The rabble was deafening, characteristically Arabian; for the place was filled with camels, mules, horses, donkeys, sheep, goats and men from the desert, men from the city, and villagers who cried and shouted boisterously.

As Madam Azuri gave orders and gossiped with her patrons, she smoked a rose-tinted water-pipe and methodically fanned herself with a beautiful Japanese fan. Occasionally she cast a glance into the courtyard and smiled through half-closed eyelids. Her glances below invariably sought out the man who squatted near the pond in the middle of the courtyard. Hammad, the man, was dressed in village attire. He had squatted there, heeding neither the filth nor the dust nor even the scorching rays of that typical tropical Arabian sun that beat on his head like crackling spears. He was beguiling himself by moving a bamboo wand from one hand to the other.

Madam Azuri noticed that he had remained in the same place for more than two hours. Several times she thought she would summon him and ask him a question or two, but each time a servant or a patron interrupted. Finally she was alone. She clapped her delicate hands and her *khadima* [girl-servant] ran to her.

"Tell that man to come here," ordered Madam Azuri, pointing to Hammad, who

crouched near the pond like a meditating Buddha.

The *khadima* ran, her bushy hair flying in the wind.

IT WAS not long till the *khadima* returned, Hammad walking behind her with a shambling gait. He appeared fatigued and worried. His clothes were ragged, his eyes bloodshot, his face cadaverous. He stopped in front of the desk and stood indifferently, waiting for Madam Azuri to speak.

"What is troubling you, may I ask?" she demanded, smiling a little.

"Nothing!" replied Hammad dryly.

"Are you sick?"

"No."

"What made you sit in the same place for more than two hours?"

"Leave me to my misery!"

"I may help you!" Madam Azuri replied kindly.

Hammad shrugged his shoulders. After a moment of silence, he ventured: "I lost everything."

"What—your wife and house?"

"No! Thanks be to Allah the Lord of Mercy, I am not married."

"What then?"

"Everything I own in this world."

"Money?"

"Yes."

"How much?"

"Five hundred Turkish pounds in gold."

"How?"

Hammad told her that before going on a pilgrimage to Mecca he had left the

money with a certain man by the name of Aminullah, who was noted for his honesty and to whom the pilgrims brought their valuables for safekeeping. On his return from Mecca, however, Aminullah refused to give back the money. With no receipt of the contract, Hammad was jeered by the police and thrown out of Aminullah's house.

Madam Azuri looked at the poor and simple Hammad and began pulling into the snake of the water-pipe until the water bubbled like an ill-natured camel.

"Where does this Aminullah live?" she asked abruptly.

Hammad told her. She pondered a while, and then said, slowly and emphatically, "Why should you make pilgrimage to Mecca when your faith is so small that you admit defeat over a paltry five hundred pounds? If it were just, your money would be returned to you. No right can be usurped while its lawful owner is able to claim it. Pray on the Prophet Muhammad, the Lord of the Messengers, and in forty-five minutes return to Aminullah and demand your money as though it were your first request. Perhaps the Prophet—on him be peace—may move his heart with pity and he will remember your having left it with him. Go, and may Allah be with you."

Hammad nodded unwillingly.

A VEILED woman crossed the Street of the Standard-Bearer and entered that of the Pasha. She stopped at the second door to the left and knocked. It was not long until the door turned on its squeaking hinges. The woman was greeted by a man of middle height, who was richly dressed and wore a huge turban and gold spectacles, behind which a pair of beady eyes squinted malignantly. The man was Aminullah.

He led the way to a spacious hall spread with rich rugs, and inviting the

woman to sit on the divan, he sat facing her.

"Can I be of any service to the lady?" he began.

"May Allah grant you a long age," said the woman, and tears came to her eyes. "My husband," she went on, "went on a pilgrimage to Mecca a year ago and has not yet returned nor even sent me a letter. I am worried and I am going to Mecca. I have brought this thousand pounds for you to keep for me." She drew a leather bag from under her coat and placed it in front of Aminullah.

Before Aminullah could speak a word, the door was flung open and Hammad walked into the room. He went directly to Aminullah, greeted him profusely, and kissed him twice on the forehead.

"I have just returned from Mecca," Hammad announced, addressing Aminullah. "If you please, let me have the five hundred Turkish pounds which I entrusted with you before I left."

Aminullah looked at Hammad, then at the veiled woman and the bag in front of him. "A thousand is better than five hundred," thought he, and walked to a table. From the drawer he took out a wooden box, opened it and produced Hammad's sack of gold and handed it to him.

Hammad's face glowed with a strange bewilderment. He clutched his sack of gold, and forgetting to thank Aminullah he ran toward the door. But before he reached it a girl-servant rushed in. She ran to the veiled woman and said: "The master has returned!" and threw herself on the veiled woman.

The veiled woman turned toward Aminullah. "In that case, of course, I shall not go to Mecca." She raised her veil to kiss the girl-servant who brought the happy tidings. Hammad looked over his shoulder, and there he discovered Madam Azuri.