A Solution of the Algiers Mystery.

ARNOLD BENNETT

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I.

"AND the launch?"

"I am unaware of the precise technical term, sir, but the launch awaits you. Perhaps I should have said it is alongside."

The reliable Lecky hated the sea; and when his master's excursions became marine, he always squinted more formidably and suddenly than usual, and added to his reliability a certain quality of ironic bitterness.

"My overcoat, please," said Cecil Thorold, who was in evening dress.

The apartment, large and low, was panelled with bird's−eye maple; divans ran along the walls, and above the divans orange curtains were drawn; the floor was hidden by the skins of wild African animals; in one corner was a Steinway piano, with the score of "The Orchid" open on the music−stand; in another lay a large, flat bowl filled with blossoms that do not bloom in England; the illumination, soft and yellow, came from behind the cornice of the room, being reflected therefrom downwards by the cream−coloured ceiling. Only by a faintly−heard tremor of some gigantic but repressed force, and by a very slight unsteadiness on the part of the floor, could you have guessed that you were aboard a steam−yacht and not in a large, luxurious house.

Lecky, having arrayed the millionaire in overcoat, muffler, crush−hat, and white gloves, drew aside a portière and followed him up a flight of stairs. They stood on deck, surrounded by the mild but treacherous Algerian night. From the white double funnels a thin smoke oozed. On the white bridge, the second mate, a spectral figure, was testing the engine−room signals, and the sharp noise of the bell seemed to desecrate the mysterious silence of the bay; but there was no other sign of life; the waiting launch was completely hidden under the high bows of the Claribel. In distant regions of the deck, glimmering beams came oddly up from below, throwing into relief some part of a boat on its davits or a section of a mast.

Cecil looked about him, at the serried lights of the Boulevard Carnot, and the riding lanterns of the vessels in the harbour. Away to the left on the hill, a few gleams showed Mustapha Supérieure, where the great English hotels are; and ten miles further east, the lighthouse on Cape Matifou flashed its eternal message to the Mediterranean. He was on the verge of feeling poetic.

"Suppose anything happens while you are at this dance, sir?"

Lecky jerked his thumb in the direction of a small steamer which lay moored scarcely a cable's−length away, under the eastern jetty. "Suppose ——?" He jerked his thumb again in exactly the same direction. His tone was still pessimistic and cynical.

"You had better fire our beautiful brass cannon," Cecil replied. "Have it fired three times. I shall hear it well enough up at Mustapha."

He descended carefully into the launch, and was whisked puffingly over the dark surface of the bay to the landing−stage, where he summoned a fiacre.

"Hotel St. James," he instructed the driver.

And the driver smiled joyously; everyone who went to the Hotel St. James was rich and lordly, and paid well, because the hill was long and steep and so hard on the poor Algerian horses.

II.

Every hotel up at Mustapha Supérieure has the finest view, the finest hygienic installation, and the finest cooking in Algeria; in other words, each is better than all the others. Hence the Hotel St. James could not be called "first among equals," since there are no equals, and one must be content to describe it as first among the unequalled. First it undoubtedly was — and perhaps will be again. Although it was new, it had what one visitor termed "that indefinable thing — cachet." It was frequented by the best people — namely, the richest people, the idlest people, the most arrogant people, the most bored people, the most titled people — that came to the southern shores of the Mediterranean in search of what they would never find — an escape from themselves. It was a vast building, planned on a scale of spaciousness only possible in a district where commercial crises have depressed the value of land, and it stood in the midst of a vast garden of oranges, lemons, and medlars. Every room — and there were three storeys and two hundred rooms — faced south: this was charged for in the bill. The public rooms, Oriental in character, were immense and complete. They included a dining−room, a drawing−room, a reading−room, a smoking−room, a billiard−room, a bridge−room, a ping−pong−room, a concert−room (with resident orchestra), and a room where Aissouias, negroes, and other curiosities from the native town might perform before select parties. Thus it was entirely self−sufficient, and lacked nothing which is necessary to the proper existence of the best people. On Thursday nights, throughout the season, there was a five−franc dance in the concert−hall. You paid five francs, and ate and drank as much as you could while standing up at the supper−tables arrayed in the dining−room.

On a certain Thursday night in early January, this Anglo−Saxon microcosm, set so haughtily in a French colony between the Mediterranean and the Djujura Mountains (with the Sahara behind), was at its most brilliant. The hotel was crammed, the prices were high, and everybody was supremely conscious of doing the correct thing. The dance had begun somewhat earlier than usual, because the eagerness of the younger guests could not be restrained. And the orchestra seemed gayer, and the electric lights brighter, and the toilettes more resplendent that night. Of course, guests came in from the other hotels. Indeed, they came in to such an extent that to dance in the ballroom was an affair of compromise and ingenuity. And the other rooms were occupied, too. The bridge players recked not of Terpsichore, the cheerful sound of ping−pong came regularly from the ping−pong−room; the retired Indian judge was giving points as usual in the billiard−room; and in the reading room the steadfast intellectuals were studying the World and the Paris New York Herald.

And all was English and American, pure Anglo−Saxon in thought and speech and gesture — save the manager of the hotel, who was Italian, the waiters, who were anything, and the wonderful concierge, who was everything.

As Cecil passed through the imposing suite of public rooms, he saw in the reading−room — posted so that no arrival could escape her eye — the elegant form of Mrs. Macalister, and, by way of a wild, impulsive freak, he stopped and talked to her, and ultimately sat down by her side.

Mrs. Macalister was one of those Englishwomen that are to be found only in large and fashionable hotels. Everything about her was mysterious, except the fact that she was in search of a second husband. She was tall, pretty, dashing, daring, well−dressed, well−informed, and, perhaps thirty−four. But no one had known her husband or her family, and no one knew her county, or the origin of her income, or how she got herself into the best cliques in the hotel. She had the air of being the merriest person in Algiers; really, she was one of the saddest, for the reason that every day left her older, and harder, and less likely to hook — well, to hook a millionaire. She had met Cecil Thorold at the dance of the previous week, and had clung to him so artfully that the coteries talked of it for three days, as Cecil well knew. And to−night he thought he might, as well as not, give Mrs. Macalister an hour's excitement of the chase, and the coteries another three days' employment.

So he sat down beside her, and they talked.

First she asked him whether he slept on his yacht or in the hotel; and he replied, sometimes in the hotel and sometimes on the yacht. Then she asked him where his bedroom was, and he said it was on the second floor, and she settled that it must be three doors from her own. Then they discussed bridge, the Fiscal Inquiry, the weather, dancing, food, the responsibilities of great wealth, Algerian railway−travelling, Cannes, gambling, Mr. Morley's "Life of Gladstone," and the extraordinary success of the hotel. Thus, quite inevitably, they reached the subject of

the Algiers Mystery. During the season, at any rate, no two guests in the hotel ever talked small−talk for more than ten minutes without reaching the subject of the Algiers mystery.

For the hotel had itself been the scene of the Algiers Mystery, and the Algiers Mystery was at once the simplest, the most charming, and the most perplexing mystery in the world. One morning, the first of April in the previous year, an honest John Bull of a guest had come down to the hotel−office, and laying a five−pound note before the head clerk, had exclaimed: "I found that lying on my dressing−table. It isn't mine. It looks good enough, but I expect it's someone's joke." Seven other people that day confessed that they had found five−pound notes in their rooms, or pieces of paper that resembled five−pound notes. They compared these notes, and then the eight went off in a body down to an agency in the Boulevard de la République, and without the least demur the notes were changed for gold. On the second of April, twelve more people found five−pound notes in their rooms, now prominent on the bed, now secreted — as, for instance, under a candlestick. Cecil himself had been a recipient. Watches were set, but with no result whatever. In a week nearly seven hundred pounds had been distributed amongst the guests by the generous, invisible ghosts. It was magnificent, and it was very soon in every newspaper in England and America. Some of the guests did not "care" for it; thought it "queer," and "uncanny," and not "nice," and these left. But the majority cared for it very much indeed, and remained till the utmost limit of the Season.

The rainfall of notes had not recommenced so far, in the present Season. Nevertheless, the hotel had been thoroughly well patronised from November onwards, and there was scarcely a guest but who went to sleep at night hoping to descry a fiver in the morning.

"Advertisement!" said some perspicacious individuals. Of course, the explanation was an obvious one. But the manager had indignantly and honestly denied all knowledge of the business, and, moreover, not a single guest had caught a single note in the act of settling down. Further, the hotel changed hands and that manager left. The mystery, therefore, remained, a delightful topic always at hand for discussion.

After having chatted, Cecil Thorold and Mrs. Macalister danced — two dances. And the hotel began audibly to wonder that Cecil could be such a fool. When, at midnight, he retired to bed, many mothers of daughters and daughters of mothers were justifiably angry, and consoled themselves by saying that he had disappeared in order to hide the shame which must have suddenly overtaken him. As for Mrs. Macalister, she was radiant.

Safely in his room, Cecil locked and wedged the door, and opened the window and looked out from the balcony at the starry night. He could hear cats playing on the roof. He smiled when he thought of the things Mrs. Macalister had said, and of the ardour of her glances. Then he felt sorry for her. Perhaps it was the whisky−and−soda which he had just drunk that momentarily warmed his heart towards the lonely creature. Only one item of her artless gossip had interested him — a statement that the new Italian manager had been ill in bed all day.

He emptied his pockets, and, standing on a chair, he put his pocket−book on the top of the wardrobe, where no Algerian marauder would think of looking for it; his revolver he tucked under his pillow. In three minutes he was asleep.

III.

He was awakened by a vigorous pulling and shaking of his arm; and he, who usually woke wide at the least noise, came to his senses with difficulty. He looked up. The electric light had been turned on.

"There's a ghost in my room, Mr. Thorold! You'll forgive me — but I'm so ——"

It was Mrs. Macalister, dishevelled and in white, who stood over him.

"This is really a bit too thick," he thought vaguely and sleepily, regretting his impulsive flirtation of the previous evening. Then he collected himself and said sternly, severely, that if Mrs. Macalister would retire to the corridor, he would follow in a moment; he added that she might leave the door open if she felt afraid. Mrs. Macalister retired, sobbing, and Cecil arose. He went first to consult his watch; it was gone — a chronometer worth a couple of hundred pounds. He whistled, climbed on to a chair, and discovered that his pocket−book was no longer in a place of safety on the top of the wardrobe; it had contained something over five hundred pounds in a highly negotiable form. Picking up his overcoat, which lay on the floor, he found that the fur lining — a millionaire's fancy, which had cost him nearly a hundred and fifty pounds — had been cut away, and was no more to be seen. Even the revolver had departed from under his pillow!

"Well!" he murmured, "this is decidedly the grand manner."

Quite suddenly it occurred to him, as he noticed a peculiar taste in his mouth, that the whisky−and−soda had contained more than whisky−and−soda — he had been drugged! He tried to recall the face of the waiter who had served him. Eyeing the window and the door, he argued that the thief had entered by the former and departed by the latter. "But the pocket−book!" he mused. "I must have been watched!"

Mrs. Macalister, stripped now of all dash and all daring, could be heard in the corridor.

"Can she ——?" He speculated for a moment, and then decided positively in the negative. Mrs. Macalister could have no design on anything but a bachelor's freedom.

He assumed his dressing−gown and slippers and went to her. The corridor was in darkness, but she stood in the light of his doorway.

"Now," he said, "this ghost of yours, dear lady!"

"You must go first," she whimpered. "I daren't. It was white. . . . but with a black face. It was at the window."

Cecil, getting a candle, obeyed. And having penetrated alone into the lady's chamber, he perceived, to begin with, that a pane had been pushed out of the window by the old, noiseless device of a sheet of treacled paper, and then, examining the window more closely, he saw that, outside, a silk ladder depended from the roof and trailed in the balcony.

"Come in without fear," he said to the trembling widow. "It must have been someone with more appetite than a ghost that you saw. Perhaps an Arab."

She came in, femininely trusting to him; and between them they ascertained that she had lost a watch, sixteen rings, an opal necklace, and some money. Mrs. Macalister would not say how much money. "My resources are slight," she remarked, "I was expecting remittances."

Cecil thought: "This is not merely in the grand manner. If it fulfils it promise, it will prove to be one of the greatest things of the age."

He asked her to keep cool, not to be afraid, and to dress herself. Then he returned to his room and dressed as quickly as he could. The hotel was absolutely quiet, but out of the depths below came the sound of a clock striking four. When, adequately but not æsthetically attired, he opened his door again, another door near by also opened, and Cecil saw a man's head.

"I say," drawled the man's head, "excuse me, but have you noticed anything?"

"Why? What?"

"Well, I've been robbed!"

The Englishman laughed awkwardly, apologetically, as though ashamed to have to confess that he had been victimised.

"Much?" Cecil inquired.

"Two hundred or so. No joke, you know."

"So have I been robbed," said Cecil. "Let us go downstairs. Got a candle? These corridors are usually lighted

all night."

"Perhaps our thief has been at the switches," said the Englishman.

"Say our thieves," Cecil corrected.

"You think there was more than one?"

"I think there were more than half a dozen," Cecil replied.

The Englishman was dressed, and the two descended together, candles in hand, forgetting the lone lady. But the lone lady had no intention of being forgotten, and she came after them, almost screaming. They had not reached the ground floor before three other doors had opened and three other victims proclaimed themselves.

Cecil led the way through the splendid saloons, now so ghostly in their elegance, which only three hours before had been the illuminated scene of such polite revelry. Ere he reached the entrance−hall, where a solitary jet was burning, the assistant−concierge (one of those officials who seem never to sleep) advanced towards him, demanding in his broken English what was the matter.

"There have been thieves in the hotel," said Cecil. "Waken the concierge."

From that point, events succeeded each other in a sort of complex rapidity. Mrs. Macalister fainted at the door of the billiard−room and was laid out on a billiard−table, with a white ball between her shoulders. The head concierge was not in his narrow bed in the alcove by the main entrance, and he could not be found. Nor could the Italian manager be found (though he was supposed to be ill in bed), nor the Italian manager's wife. Two stablemen were searched out from somewhere; also a cook. And then the Englishman who had lost two hundred or so went forth into the Algerian night to bring a gendarme from the post in the Rue d'Isly.

Cecil Thorold contented himself with talking to people as, in ones and twos, and in various stages of incorrectness, they came into the public rooms, now brilliantly lighted. All who came had been robbed. What surprised him was the slowness of the hotel to wake up. There were two hundred and twenty guests in the place. Of these, in a quarter of an hour, perhaps fifteen had risen. The remainder were apparently oblivious of the fact that something very extraordinary, and something probably very interesting to them personally, had occurred and was occurring.

"Why! It's a conspiracy, sir. It's a conspiracy, that's what it is!" decided the Indian judge.

"Gang is a shorter word," Cecil observed, and a young girl in a macintosh giggled.

Sleepy employés now began to appear, and the rumour ran that six waiters and a chambermaid were missing. Mrs. Macalister rallied from the billiard table and came into the drawing−room, where most of the company had gathered. Cecil yawned (the influence of the drug was still upon him) as she approached him and weakly spoke. He answered absently; he was engaged in watching the demeanour of these idlers on the face of the earth — how incapable they seemed of any initiative, and yet with what magnificent Britannic phlegm they endured the strange situation! The talking was neither loud nor impassioned.

Then the low, distant sound of a cannon was heard. Once, twice, thrice.

Silence ensued.

"Heavens!" sighed Mrs. Macalister, swaying towards Cecil. "What can that be?"

He avoided her, hurried out of the room, and snatched somebody else's hat from the hat−racks in the hall. But just as he was turning the handle of the main door of the hotel, the Englishman who had lost two hundred or so returned out of the Algerian night with an inspector of police. The latter courteously requested Cecil not to leave the building, as he must open the inquiry (ouvrir l'enquête) at once. Cecil was obliged, regretfully, to comply.

The inspector of police then commenced his labours. He telephoned (no one had thought of the telephone) for assistance and asked the Central Bureau to watch the railway station, the port, and the stage coaches. He acquired the names and addresses of tout le monde. He made catalogues of articles. He locked all the servants in the ping−pong−room. He took down narratives, beginning with Cecil's. And while the functionary was engaged with Mrs. Macalister, Cecil quietly but firmly disappeared.

After his departure, the affair loomed larger and larger in mere magnitude, but nothing that came to light altered its leading characteristics. A wholesale robbery had been planned with the most minute care and knowledge, and executed with the most daring skill. Some ten persons — the manager and his wife, a chambermaid, six waiters, and the concierge — seemed to have been concerned in the enterprise, excluding Mrs. Macalister's Arab and no doubt other assistants. (The guests suddenly remembered how superior the concierge and the waiters had been to the ordinary concierge and waiter!) At a quarter past five o'clock the police had

ascertained that a hundred rooms had been entered, and horrified guests were still descending! The occupants of many rooms, however, made no response to a summons to awake. These, it was discovered afterwards, had either, like Cecil, received a sedative unawares, or they had been neatly gagged and bound. In the result, the list of missing valuables comprised nearly two hundred watches, eight hundred rings, a hundred and fifty other articles of jewellery, several thousand pounds' worth of furs, three thousand pounds in coin, and twenty−one thousand pounds in banknotes and other forms of currency. One lady, a doctor's wife, said she had been robbed of eight hundred pounds in Bank of England notes, but her story obtained little credit; other tales of enormous loss, chiefly by women, were also taken with salt. When the dawn began, at about six o'clock, an official examination of the facade of the hotel indicated that nearly every room had been invaded by the balconied window, either from the roof or from the ground. But the stone flags of the terrace, and the beautifully asphalted pathways of the garden disclosed no trace of the plunderers.

"I guess your British habit of sleeping with the window open don't cut much ice to−day, anyhow!" said an American from Indianapolis to the company.

That morning no omnibus from the hotel arrived at the station to catch the six−thirty train which takes two days to ramble to Tunis and to Biskra. And all the liveried porters talked together in excited Swiss−German.

IV.

"My compliments to Captain Black," said Cecil Thorold, "and repeat to him that all I want him to do is to keep her in sight. He needn't overhaul her too much."

"Precisely, sir." Lecky bowed; he was pale.

"And you had better lie down."

"I thank you, sir, but I find a recumbent position inconvenient. Perpetual motion seems more agreeable."

Cecil was back in the large, low room panelled with bird's−eye maple. Below him the power of two thousand horses drove through the nocturnal Mediterranean swell his Claribel of a thousand tons. Thirty men were awake and active on board her, and twenty slept in the vast, clean forecastle, with electric lights blazing six inches above their noses. He lit a cigarette, and going to the piano, struck a few chords from "The Orchid"; but since the music would not remain on the stand, he abandoned that attempt and lay down on a divan to think.

He had reached the harbour, from the hotel, in twenty minutes, partly on foot at racing speed, and partly in an Arab cart, also at racing speed. The Claribel's launch awaited him, and in another five minutes the launch was slung to her davits, and the Claribel under way. He learnt that the small and sinister vessel, the Perroquet Vert (of Oran), which he and his men had been watching for several days, had slipped unostentatiously between the southern and eastern jetties, had stopped for a few minutes to hold converse with a boat that had put off from the neighbourhood of Lower Mustapha, and had then pointed her head north−west, as though for some port in the province of Oran or in Morocco.

And in the rings of cigarette smoke which he made, Cecil seemed now to see clearly the whole business. He had never relaxed his interest in the affair of the five−pound notes. He had vaguely suspected it to be part of some large scheme; he had presumed, on slight grounds, a connection between the Perroquet Vert and the Italian manager of the hotel. Nay, more, he had felt sure that some great stroke was about to be accomplished. But of precise knowledge, of satisfactory theory, of definite expectation, he had had none — until Mrs. Macalister, that unconscious and man−hunting agent of Destiny, had fortunately wakened him in the nick of time. Had it not been for his flirtation of the previous evening, he might still be asleep in his bed at the hotel. . . . He perceived the entire plan. The five−pound notes had been mysteriously scattered, certainly to advertise the hotel, but only to advertise it for a particular and colossal end, to fill it full and overflowing with fat victims. The situation had been thoroughly studied in all its details, and the task had been divided and allotted to various brains. Every room must have been examined, watched, and separately plotted against; the habits and idiosyncracy of every victim must have been individually weighed and considered. Nothing, no trifle, could have been forgotten. And then some supreme intelligence had drawn the threads together and woven them swiftly into the pattern of a single night, almost a single hour!. . . . And the loot (Cecil could estimate it pretty accurately) had been transported down the hill to Mustapha Inférieure, tossed into a boat, and so to the Perroquet Vert. And the Perroquet Vert, with loot and looters on board, was bound, probably, for one of those obscure and infamous ports of Oran or Morocco — Tenez, Mostaganem, Beni Sar, Melilla, or the city of Oran, or Tangier itself! He knew something of the Spanish and Maltese dens of Oran and Tangier, the clearing−houses for stolen goods of two continents, and the impregnable refuge of scores of ingenious villains.

And when he reflected upon the grandeur and immensity of the scheme, so simple in its essence, and so leisurely in its achievement, like most grand schemes; when he reflected upon the imagination which had been necessary even to conceive it, and the generalship which had been necessary to its successful conclusion, he murmured admiringly —

p "The man who thought of that and did it may be a scoundrel; but he is also an artist, and a great one!"

And just because he, Cecil Thorold, was a millionaire, and possessed a hundred−thousand−pound toy, which could do nineteen knots an hour, and cost fifteen hundred pounds a month to run, he was about to defeat that great artist and nullify that great scheme, and incidentally to retrieve his watch, his revolver, his fur, and his five hundred pounds. He had only to follow, and to warn one of the French torpedo−boats which are always patrolling the coast between Algiers and Oran, and the bubble would burst!

He sighed for the doomed artist; and he wondered what that victimised crowd of European loungers, who lounged sadly round the Mediterranean in winter, and sadly round northern Europe in summer, had done in their

languid and luxurious lives that they should be saved, after all, from the pillage to which the great artist in theft had subjected them!

Then Lecky re−entered the state room.

"We shall have a difficulty in keeping the Perroquet Vert in sight, sir."

"What!" exclaimed Cecil. "That tub! That coffin! You don't mean she can do twenty knots?"

"Exactly, sir. Coffin! It — I mean she — is sinking."

Cecil ran on deck. Dawn was breaking over Matifou, and a faint, cold, grey light touched here and there the heaving sea. His captain spoke and pointed. Ahead, right ahead, less than a mile away, the Perroquet Vert was sinking by the stern, and even as they gazed at her, a little boat detached itself from her side in the haze of the morning mist; and she sank, disappeared, vanished amid a cloud of escaping steam. They were four miles north−east of Cape Caxine. Two miles further westward, a big Dominion liner, bound direct for Algiers from the New World, was approaching and had observed the catastrophe — for she altered her course. In a few minutes, the Claribel picked up the boat of the Perroquet Vert. It contained three Arabs.

The tale told by the Arabs (two of them were brothers, and all three came from Oran) fully sustained Cecil Thorold's theory of the spoliation of the hotel. Naturally they pretended at first to an entire innocence concerning the schemes of those who had charge of the Perroquet Vert. The two brothers, who were black with coal−dust when rescued, swore that they had been physically forced to work in the stokehold; but ultimately all three had to admit a knowledge of things which was decidedly incriminating, and all three got three years' imprisonment. The only part of the Algiers mystery which remained a mystery was the cause of the sinking of the Perroquet Vert. Whether she was thoroughly unseaworthy (she had been picked up cheap at Melilla), or whether someone (not on board) had deliberately arranged her destruction, perhaps to satisfy a Moorish vengeance, was not ascertained. The three Arabs could only be persuaded to say that there had been eleven Europeans and seven natives on the ship, and that they alone, by the mercy of Allah, had escaped from the swift catastrophe.

The hotel underwent an acute crisis, from which, however, it is emerging. For over a week a number of the pillaged guests discussed a diving enterprise of salvage. But the estimates were too high, and it came to nothing. So they all, Cecil included, began to get used to the idea of possessing irrecoverable property to the value of forty thousand pounds in the Mediterranean. A superb business in telegraphed remittances was done for several days. The fifteen beings who had accompanied the Perroquet Vert to the bottom were scarcely thought of, for it was almost universally agreed that the way of transgressors is, and ought to be, hard.

As for Cecil Thorold, the adventure, at first so full of the promise of joy, left him melancholy, until an unexpected sequel diverted the channel of his thoughts.