

The Treasure of the Bucoleon

By Arthur D. Howden Smith

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SYNOPSIS

In New York, Hugh Chesby, English World War veteran, receives a story of a treasure in Constantinople in the existence of which his uncle, Lord Chesby, firmly believes. A cablegram notifies Hugh of his uncle's sailing for New York. At the dock Hugh and his chum, Jack Nash, learn from Watkins, Lord Chesby's valet, that the old gentleman has left with a stranger, purporting to be a friend of Hugh. A mysterious telephone message notifies Hugh that his uncle is in a hospital, dying, victim of an assassin. Before his death he babbles of the treasure, and tells that he was stabbed by "Tou-tou." With Lord Chesby's body, Hugh and Jack sail for England. In London Hugh and Jack meet their war buddy, Nikka Zareako, famous gypsy violinist, and pore over some old documents seemingly having a bearing on the treasure and its location. A hidden room, referred to as the "Prior's Vent," is frequently mentioned. Montey Hilyer, man of shady reputation, but owner of a neighboring estate, calls on Hugh with a party of friends, mostly foreigners. One of them, introduced as "Signor Teodoreschi," an Italian, makes a distinctly unfavorable impression on Jack.

CHAPTER III—Continued

"That is a gorgeous fireplace," said the countess.
"Ah, yes," he agreed, with his absurdly broad pronunciation. "Rather a quaint verse there, too, I see. How does it run?"
He picked it out slowly, with some help from the Russian girl.

*Whanne thaffe ye Pappist
Churchmanne
Woudder seke Hys Souls
contente
Hee tookened up ye Wyszshinge
Stone
And trodde ye Prior's Vent.*

"Danced odd! What does it all mean?"
"I haven't the slightest idea," I said. "Nor has anybody else."
Our conversation had attracted the attention of the others, and Mrs. Hilyer drew Nikka and the count in front of the chimney-piece.

"You don't suppose there could be some secret meaning to those words, do you?" she asked.
"I wish you'd pick it out for me," I countered.

"That was a query I had often put to myself.
"A key to something else, you know," she went on. "Our ancestors were fond of that sort of thing. They loved mystery, and life wasn't as safe in those days as it is in ours."

"It's perfectly thrilling," cried the countess. "This is just the kind of room to house some wonderful secret—or perhaps a tragedy."

I felt something behind me, and turned my head. The Italian had left the table in the center of the room and moved up to the fringe of our group. His green eyes, flaring with an uncanny vital force, were intent upon the rhyme on the overmantel.

"Humph," I thought to myself, "you may not be able to speak English, but you appear to be able to read it."

He growled something in an undertone to Mrs. Hilyer and she nodded. "Fascinating as your room is, I am afraid we must leave you, Lord Chesby," she called over to Hugh. "Signor Teodoreschi had just reminded me we have to put him on the London train before we drive home."

"I'll have your motors called up," returned Hugh impassively, as he and Hilyer joined the rest of us.
He rang and gave the necessary orders to Watkins.

"Don't forget that tip on Krugersdorp for the St. Leger," I heard Hilyer insist to Hugh. "I'm not so sure about the derby. You aren't taking on any hunters, are you? I've—"
"By the way," Hugh interrupted. "I meant to ask you: did any of your people see strangers around here the morning of my uncle's funeral?"

I was amazed at the sudden silence that gripped the room. The Italian, Teodoreschi, already in the doorway after a curt nod of farewell, stopped dead and stared hard at Hugh.

"You see," Hugh continued, "I heard one of your cars was seen on the London road in back of the park, and I'm anxious to know whether any strangers were seen that morning, especially strangers on foot."

"Not that we've heard of," responded Mrs. Hilyer, promptly. "All of us

were at the funeral. And if the servants had noticed anything queer, I'm sure they would have reported it to me."

"Thanks," said Hugh. "Would it be too much trouble for you to inquire of the... just the same?"

"Not at all. Do you mind telling us what happened?"

The whole company crowded closer. "Oh, nothing much," answered Hugh deliberately, "except we had reason to suppose the house had been entered."

"Great Scott!" protested Hilyer. "That's a go! We've never had anything like that before in the county."
"Did you lose anything, Lord Chesby?" inquired Hildi Bey.

"I think not."
The Countess Sandra Vassilieva permitted an artistic shudder to undulate her figure.

"Bozhe mol, Maude!" she cried. "Do you bring us into your rural England to risk death from burglars? I prefer the Bolsheviks!"

Several people laughed.
"All the same, it's no joke," answered Mrs. Hilyer. "Thanks for the



I Was Amazed at the Sudden Silence That Gripped the Room.

warning, Lord Chesby. We'll let the dogs loose around the home after this at night."

Teodoreschi, still standing in the doorway, rasped a single sentence, and passed out. The others flocked after him like hounds over whom the huntsman cracks his whip. Mrs. Hilyer and the countess waved a last good-by, and Watkins closed the door after them.

Nikka and I looked at one another, and burst out laughing. Hugh, with a muffled curse, threw up the nearest window.

"Let's have some fresh air," he said. "That scoundrel Montey Hilyer makes me feel dirty."

"They were a queer crowd," I admitted. "That countess wasn't bad looking, though. I think she was trying to pump me."

"Well, Hilyer didn't ask me any questions, I'm bound to say," returned Hugh. "He was too busy with his beastly gambling anecdotes, and crooked dope. What did you make out of them, Nikka?"

Nikka lit a cigarette before he replied.
"I think they are a party of polite thieves," he answered at last. "At least, some of them. The Italian gave me the shakes."

"Who was the Bey person?" inquired Hugh.

Nikka's lip curled.
"That fellaheen cur! I know the breed. They live by craft and worse. If we go to Paris I think I shall make inquiries about some of them. I know persons at the prefecture of police who ought to have their dossiers."

"How did they get on the subject of that verse of Lady Jane's?" demanded Hugh.

"It was the countess and Mrs. Hilyer," I explained. "They saw it, and insisted on reading some hidden meaning into it."

As I spoke I looked up again at the overmantel where the Gothic characters showed dimly in the light from the smoldering logs and the rays of the sunset. I conned over the four lines deliberately. "Ye Prior's Vent." The last three words seemed to jump out at me. "Some secret meaning. . . . A key to something else, you know," Mrs. Hilyer's phrases re-echoed

in my brain. I studied the rhyme a second time.

"Hugh," I said suddenly, "if you happen to have with you the copy of that other verse of Lady Jane's?"

He produced it from his pocketbook without speaking. I spread the copy before me.

*Putte downe ye Ancient riddell
In Doonick, Scoclanis ooloon
Recess O ye mystick Sybill
Vox Hymno who doth Endeavour
Nor treate Hys Efforte tendour.*

And in the twinkling of an eyelid the cipher leaped out before me. I did not reason it out. It just came to me—when I saw the VE in the next to the last line, I think.

"I've got it," I shouted, and I sprang up and danced across the hearth, waving the paper in my hand. "I've got it! The key! The cipher! The treasure—"
"But even as I started to say that I thought better of it.

"No, that's going too far," I panted, breaking off in my mad dance. "I've got something, but how much it means is another matter."

Hugh pulled me down beside them. "Talk sense, Jack," he ordered. "Show us your—"

"Here," I shoved the copy of Lady Jane's doggerel in front of him and Nikka. "Now watch!"

I took a pencil and drew it through all except the first letters of the first and last words in each line. So:

*Putte downe ye Ancient riddell
In Doonick, Scoclanis ooloon
Recess O ye mystick Sybill
Vox Hymno who doth Endeavour
Nor treate Hys Efforte tendour.*

The result, of course, was:
P I R V N
r o s e E t

"Prior's Vent!" gasped Nikka. "He has found something!"

And his eyes, too, sought the verse carved on the overmantel.

"Up there, too! It can mean only one thing."

"That the secret to the location of the treasure is in the Prior's vent," amended Nikka.

Hugh, who had been in a brown study, aroused himself, and peered at the mass of the fireplace.

"I'm not trying to belittle Jack's discovery," he said slowly, "but you chaps must remember that we don't know where or what the Prior's vent is."

"Except that you may take it for certain it is in this room," replied Nikka.

"And that perhaps the fireplace has something to do with it," I suggested. Hugh shook his head.

"No, no, Jack, that won't wash. You yourself, have measured that chimney area, and we all agreed there wasn't space inside it for a secret chamber. If I thought there was, I'd tear it down."

"Hold on," counseled Nikka. "Easy does it. For the first time we've got something to go upon. Let's chew it over for a while, and see what we can make out of it."

We chewed it over until bedtime without reaching any decision.

CHAPTER IV

The Prior's Vent

It was a long time before I went to sleep. Lady Jane's cipher and its inconclusive information kept buzzing through my head. But at last I dozed off and dreamed of fat monks who popped out of a round hole in a courtyard in endless succession until one of their number, stouter than the rest, became wedged in the opening. He babbled profanely in Latin, and I started to go to his aid—and waked up.

The night was very dark, and there was not even a hint of starshine to light the room. I rolled over, and shut my eyes, and promptly sat up in bed. I thought I had heard a strange sound. What it was I could not say. It was very faint, a gentle hurring rip.

I swung out of bed, reached for a candle, thought better of it, and crossed to the door communicating with Hugh's room. It was ajar, and as I poked my head in, I could hear his gentle breathing. Nikka's room, beyond his, was quiet. Outside of us three, only Watkins slept in that part of the house.

My first instinct was to laugh at myself, but I opened the door from my room into the hall and listened there. At first I heard nothing. Then it seemed to me that I detected a

creaking, as if of subdued footsteps.

I could not quell the uneasiness which possessed me. I started to call Hugh and Nikka, and stopped with my hand raised to knock on Nikka's door. It would be a fool stunt to wake them for nothing but my own fancies.

After a moment's further hesitation, I crept downstairs into the entrance hall, groping my way in the pitch darkness. Feeling more than ever like a fool, I looked into the dining room and music room. I had just stepped back into the hall when a chink of light shone out of the short passage that led from the hall into the gunroom. It flickered away, and returned.

Wishing now that I had taken the automatic that lay on the table beside my bed, I stole into the gunroom passage. The door of the gunroom was ajar, but not sufficiently to permit me to see inside. I drew it cautiously toward me. The chink of light was more pronounced. A brief mutter of voices, hoarse and restrained, reached my ears. As the crack widened, I adjusted my eye to the opening and peered in.

The gunroom was a pool of shadows, save only in front of the fireplace, where a single ray of light played upon a preposterous figure crouched on the mantel-shelf. The light came from an electric torch in the hand of a second figure outlined against the dying coals of the wood-fire on the hearth. They mumbled back and forth to each other, and now I caught once more the faint noise like the prolonged ripping of tough cloth which had attracted my attention upstairs.

The light flashed on steel, and I realized that the figure on the mantel-shelf was working with a small saw on the panel of the over-mantel containing Lady Jane's verse. As I watched, he suspended his efforts and barked impatiently at his assistant. The ray of light quivered and shifted upward. For a fleeting section of a second it traversed the figure on the mantel-shelf and focussed momentarily on his head and shoulders.

I gasped. The figure was Professor Teodoreschi, the Italian chemist who had accompanied the Hilyer's party. In my amazement my hand tightened involuntarily, its grip on the door, which swung out past me with a loud groan. Another beam of light flashed from the shadow close by, focussed on me and snapped off.

"Americansky!" cried a man's voice. I heard him leap through the utter of furniture, and dimly saw him fling his torch at me. It crashed against the door, and I snatched up a chair, stooped low and lashed at his legs. He tumbled in a heap.

"Hugh! Nikka!" I shouted at the top of my lungs.

I had my hands full on the instant. The man who had lunged the torch at me was already scrambling to his feet. The gorilla-like Italian had jumped from the mantel-shelf with the alert energy of a big cat. He and the man who had been helping him down were now dodging toward me.

"Ne tirez pas!" hissed Teodoreschi in throaty accents that were vaguely familiar. "Perceze! Attendez, Serge, Viada! Perceze! Polgnardez!"

The Italian's helper reached me first. I saw his knife in his hand, and I ruck out with my fist. Being a knife-fighter, it was what he least expected, and he went over. I ran behind the large center table, and as the Italian and the other man closed in, I reared it on end and toppled it at them. They jumped apart, and I found opportunity to have another chair at the chap I had just knocked down.

But I was in for a bad time. Teodoreschi was on me like a human juggernaut. He swept aside my blows as though they were harmless, folded me in his great arms and tossed me from him. I spun across the hearth into the fireplace, and brought up on all-fours in the ashes.

Every tooth in my head was jarred by the crash, but I had no time to think of pain. I heard the guttural snarl of the gorilla-man behind me, and looked up to see his knife descending to stab that was aimed inside my collarbone. Desperate, I threw myself backward against his legs, and he fell on the couch. Yet he was up again in an instant, and chopping at me, with foam dripping from his lips (TO BE CONTINUED.)

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