

The Social Buccaneer

By
FREDERIC S. ISHAM

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PROLOGUE.

Chatfield Bruce, twenty-six, has secured an enviable position in New York society by large contributions to charity. Although reputed to have great wealth, he lives entirely on his salary as head of a department at the Third Goddard's mercantile establishment. The safe deposit box of Samuel Page has been robbed of valuable bonds. Mr. Bolger, a detective, takes up the hunt for the thief. A party at Goddard's country mansion gathers together many society notables, among whom is Sir Archibald, an Englishman. Goddard's daughter wears her famous string of pearls, which she exhibits to those present. A burning lantern ignites the dress of Marjorie Wood. Bruce extinguishes the blaze, suffering a burned hand. On an invitation from Marjorie's father, Bruce elects to stay at the Wood home overnight. After others are in bed, Bruce reconnoiters about the Goddard home. A thief who has stolen the famous pearl necklace enters from the house, frightened by a woman's cry. In the chase that follows, Bruce is pursued as the thief. He catches up with the real culprit and ends his pursuers. Returning to the house he finds Marjorie in the library. She thinks his restlessness is due to his burns. A party from Wood's house motors to the scene of the robbery and learns that the pearls have been recovered. Upon examination they prove to be a bogus substitute. Bruce sends Simpson to the express office with his soiled dress suit. Caglioli, Sir Archibald's secretary, is instructed to intercept the bundle, which has been placed on the train for New York. Bruce goes to the city, closely followed by the others. Caglioli secures the parcel. Sir Archibald hopes to expose Bruce, who in retaliation turns attention to Goddard, claiming that conscience forbids his continuing longer at Goddard's employ. The bundle is opened, but the pearls are not found. Marjorie shows anxiety about Bruce. The latter visits Ting, his Chinese friend, and is trapped by Sir Archibald and his men. Disguised in oriental dress he is shadowed by Caglioli, to whom he reveals his identity.

A Confession.

"You thought I might recognize you some time," murmured Bruce, very close to the other, a hand in his pocket, holding now the something hard that just touched, made itself felt to his companion. "And so, at Comscot, as I passed the back of Mr. Wood's place, you sought to make me a slight present, but only succeeded in nothing but my new straw hat."
"Would you believe if I denied it?"
"You?" murmured Bruce in mild surprise. "Who have made lying a profession? You—my dear friend? An accent of pained reproof manifested itself in his tones.
Bruce stopped. "But, alas, soon now must we part, and never more do I expect to see you never more," he repeated—"mournful words."
Caglioli waited; looked at him. "I suppose that's not all, is it?" he asked.
"Almost." Bruce regarded him up and down. "I've arranged that if anything happens to me tonight your secret will not be kept. There's a bit of paper in my strong box with a little writing on it that will become the property of others in case—you understand?" The secretary swallowed.
"The Nine-times-Nine numbers only a few million members, more or less. I neither condemn nor approve of them, but they exist. I accept them merely as a fact. They never forget nor forgive—if they know," he added significantly, "where to put their hands on whom they seek, the traitor, he who betrays them."
"Let us go back. You belonged to them. You sold their secrets. You even managed to capture, for the reward offered, a certain benevolent pirate, when—well, I, as you know, with a small band hurriedly organized from the children of the plain, interfered. We freed Ting's father, the pirate, for good and sufficient reasons. It was great sport." Caglioli bestowed upon him a malicious look.
"You did not find it so? You managed to capture, I suppose, made your way by various means, as a matter of fact, to the island of the pirates, and you hid them from him. 'Happy-For-a-Thousand-Years.' How the words vibrated through her! Beneath her throat the violet hued stuff suddenly shimmered to her quick breath. Though the mist filled her eyes, something waved. A drapery? She felt the chill as it fell back into place and looked before her. She stood alone. He had gone—gone!
No. There was a footstep without. He was coming back. The orchestra began suddenly to play—the waltz, the Viennese waltz they had danced together ages ago! A hand was at the curtain. If he came in now! Madness! Glamour! 'Happy-For-a-Thou'—She heard a voice, a man's voice.
"I was wondering where I should find you." It was Sir Archibald!
A little shop in a street of colonnades at the foot of a great hill overlooking a big port, gateway to or from a magnificent island of Nod whose sound millions are just beginning to raise.
"It began far up one of the rivers of China, where even in these enlightened days the genuine old-fashioned pig-tails yet flourishes. The idea, I mean, began there, perhaps was announced by suggested by a certain old river pirate whose life I once happened to save. But that's another story. If you ever meet Senor Caglioli again, which I doubt, he could tell you about it. This buccaner of the yellow stream, he went on in ironical scoffing accents, "was a terrible fellow. In times of famine, when thousands were dying and the Chinese merchants hoisted the price of rice to a prohibitive figure, this wicked corsair helped himself to the sword's point to all the cereal and distribution for getting to the famished hordes. Primitive so villain there was something delightful about it to me. I cherished a positive liking for the old marauder. Of course they got his head in the end, but when his spirit like that of the man in the poem swung past the Milky Way to the realms of Pluto I'd warrant there was no what some one else said—what some one else did or thought as he met the dark master's queries. A bow unto himself!" merrily. "A personality." He broke off with a laugh. "That seems about all, he remarked. The rest becomes more by episode and degenerates into mere vague details."
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"He has been very honest about it in that case. I thought to go worth the trouble, the excitement was rather stimulating, but it has ceased to be so." He looked at her. "Goodby, Mrs. Happy-For-a-Thousand-Years," he laughed.
"He has moved slightly. You are going away from New York?" She had asked something of the kind, she remembered before.
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"Sir Archibald," the secretary's teeth made a sound "who was engaged by his government in the vain task of eliminating the Nine-times-Nine in a laudable attempt by substitution, a la Anglo-Saxon, giving them something better." Fortunately for you, wherever Buddhism reigns your life would have been forfeited if it became known who you were. Chance brought you here. You knew me a possible menace to your own safety and probably represented to Sir Archibald I was a member of the Nine-times-Nine—a mistake, though they forced on me this symbol of power among them, out of gratitude for having saved one of the number, a better man than you."
Bruce showed a ring with a design the "Down" a circle above a straight line the sun rising above the earth. Very eloquent these Chinese characters. "Don't you think so?"
"I have no opinion," said the secretary sourly.
"And yet you should have. You are part Chinese. Your mother was a Manchurian girl. Are you ashamed of her?"
"Come to the point," said Caglioli harshly. Rage, terror, humiliation burned in his eyes.
"Oh, most filial son," murmured Bruce softly, then his voice suddenly changed. "You," he went on crisply, "are thought to be dead. It was cleverly arranged on your part. Lo, you are found to be living! Is there a spot in this world where you would be safe from death? Worse! From torture? You know these people."
Caglioli's expression showed that he did. "What do you want?" he said.
"I see you appreciate the point, fully," he observed, with merry accent on the last word. "Too bad we did not understand each other better before, eh? Since last night you have been to me slightly irritating like a disagreeable insect. But I forgive you."
"Anything more?" observed the secretary. His face wore an odd pallor, the pain dripped from him.
"You will leave New York tonight," said Bruce in the same gentle tones. "Make what excuses you please to Sir Archibald. You," waving his hand airily, "have ceased to be a factor in the new world to all intents and purposes, have never been here or heard of such vain bundles as the Goldberg pearls."
A moment he stood, a bizarre figure in saturated silken garments, his face clear, finely chiseled, outlined against a slant of rain. Then the long white hand made another gesture, half playful, though the light of his eyes had never been brighter, more compelling. Caglioli turned, moved softly, silently away.

Two months passed and nothing more was heard of the Goldberg pearls. The social season had opened at highest pressure. New York was at its gayest, and the little affair at Comscot was apparently soon forgotten by every one except a few of the principals who were closely concerned in it.
The raid on Ting's place had revealed nothing; the European clothes that unassuming dealer presumably had worn at the station and later could not be found. Caglioli, who could have brought evidence against the oriental, had vanished, no one knew where, leaving a very unsatisfactory message behind him for Sir Archibald's puzzled scrutiny.
That last gentleman and Mr. Bolger found themselves at an absolute standstill. Since the afternoon in Sir Archibald's rooms at the Waldorf Mr. Goldberg had developed a bad case of what the Englishman, in poker parlance, designated "frigid extremities." He seemed reconciled, nay, rather anxious, to let the matter drop. Sir Archibald, secretly enraged, folded his arms, centered his chest and looked around for a new secretary. He found one, a nice little man with innocuous face and no past.
With the opening of the season the usual number of charitable occasions were, of course, in evidence, and of these none was looked forward to with more interest than the oriental evening planned to take place at the spacious town house of Gordon Wood, especially as it was known that Chatfield Bruce had consented to appear in a little Japanese play. The young man's histrionic ability was considered to be of a high water, he was at least the star of all the amateur plays they could touch of.

ation. The large concert room of the mansion had been transformed into a fair imitation of a Japanese theater. The audience assembled for the most part in the little squares divided off for them in the orchestra, and at the back of the room were a half dozen improvised boxes. There were a few effective flower "arrangements," but not many.
These Chatfield Bruce, now waiting for his cue in the men's greenroom tentatively, in the least critically, regarded as he peered through an opening out into the theater. On the stage a trio of genuine acrobats, paid performers from the laud of the chrysanthemums, were entertaining the audience with juggling.
All seemed to enjoy the novelty of the entertainment. Bruce listened to the sounds of merriment. He was alone in the greenroom. Those of the men who later had "parts" to fill now mingled with the people, as did the Japanese princesses and geisha girls, who afterward were to appear in the play. These last, laughing and gay, moved about among the guests, according to the fashion on such occasions. Among them the young man saw Miss Marjorie Wood.
With eyes very brilliant under the black lashes and cheeks deeply tinted, she paused here to chat, there to join in the laughter. She appeared the young hostess par excellence, gracious and beautiful in her clinging oriental robe of some silken, lustrous material, violet and blue in tone.
Bruce's gaze followed her. He noted with what pride she held her head, the exquisite distinction that characterized every movement. They had met and spoken to each other that night, but a few conventional words had been said. Her eyes, starlike had met his, seemed as if they would have held him yet longer. But with little mien and manner he had gaily made way for others. Her laugh a little forced at some one else's words or witicism had followed him as he turned from her.
To most of those in the audience the plot of the little play went for nothing. The production seemed mainly picturesque, replete with oriental people and titles with many fantastic scenes. But the costumes and the acting of Chatfield Bruce and Marjorie Wood more than saved the day of the evening.

The young hostess in the role of Miss Happy-For-a-Thousand-Years presented as the society reporters afterward affirmed an adequate interpretation of that ironically felicitous part. When her lover the beggar prince, who robs the rich to give to the poor, was in the natural course of events or vicissitudes led to the executioner at the command of her future lord, the great Shogun, she "changed her state" very beautifully in other words, died. And with artistic consistency she refused to come out again in answer to numerous recalls, as did Mr. Bruce, after he was supposed to have paid the final penalty.
Instead the curtain again went up and the audience was regaled with the sight of a single cherry tree. Had they remained quiet they would have heard the faint sound of the wind. They could see however, the branches of the tree move, the blossoms fall one by one as the curtain went down for the last time on the pretty suffering things. What did it mean? Several in the audience looked at one another. Was it symbolical?
The pupils of Miss Flossie's eyes, bent on the stage from one of the boxes, were slightly dimmed. With fingers pressed closely against her warm palms she had witnessed the lovers parting. The scene was, of course, most unattractive from the European or American standpoint. Cependent bows! That leave taking seemed pitifully cold. Only the eyes spoke, yet how much they said!

Those of Chatfield Bruce seemed to express in that brief moment more than a volume of words. Marjorie Wood's puzzled Miss Flossie. What did she read in their depths? Incredulity, wonderment, half understanding?
Had she seen the play within the play the chances are she would have been more interested. Had she looked behind the curtain a moment later her curiosity, if no livelier feeling, would have been greatly stirred.
Chatfield Bruce and Marjorie Wood stood there now on the stage alone. Forgotten were the characters of the play. It was two real people who looked at each other.
"You said I might see you once more, and so I came tonight," he began.
"Yes," she answered. All the bright color had gone; she was very pale.
"I—I promised to explain a little," he went on hesitatingly, with seeming ease. He could not show her any of the pain that the knowledge of the immeasurable gulf between them made him feel. "But it would have been much easier just to have left, to have gone away, without that."
She lifted her eyes slightly. "You are going away then?" she managed to say.
"Yes, oh, yes," he answered carelessly.
The shining draperies about her stirred. "Far?" came from her lips. She seemed speaking without volition of her own.
"As far as may be," he said, with a reckless laugh. "I'm sorry you found that key." He spoke now with what seemed language, terrible loudness. "But it was chronicled in the book of fate. Why did you not give me up?" She did not answer. "It would have been easier for me than this." His long, slanting fingers lifted involuntarily to his brow. The last words had broken from his lips in a different tone than she had ever found from him before. "Fate," he said, "is a cruel thing."

eyes. "Wouldn't it be better if I did just go now without?"
"Oh, no," she said. Her voice was very still, unlike her own. She did not seem herself at all to him nor to herself.
"Ah, well!" He would have to go on to the end. Did he not know he would be forced to do so when he came there that night? "Where shall I begin? That is the point," he observed with light helplessness. "It all seems so incomprehensible, unexplainable, when one attempts to explain." He remarked, "I didn't know how extraordinarily difficult it would be. Of course, you know, I'm a thief!"
She shivered. Her lips were very uncertain. She seemed to try to speak, but could not. The cherry blossoms lay mockingly bright at her feet.
"I guess that's the best way to start," said Chatfield Bruce contentedly. He looked at her now, but did not seem to see her. Some vista far beyond engrossed his look. "So much established, one can go on, or rather go backward," he laughed. He did not spare himself now.
"It began far up one of the rivers of China, where even in these enlightened days the genuine old-fashioned pig-tails yet flourishes. The idea, I mean, began there, perhaps was announced by suggested by a certain old river pirate whose life I once happened to save. But that's another story. If you ever meet Senor Caglioli again, which I doubt, he could tell you about it. This buccaner of the yellow stream, he went on in ironical scoffing accents, "was a terrible fellow. In times of famine, when thousands were dying and the Chinese merchants hoisted the price of rice to a prohibitive figure, this wicked corsair helped himself to the sword's point to all the cereal and distribution for getting to the famished hordes. Primitive so villain there was something delightful about it to me. I cherished a positive liking for the old marauder. Of course they got his head in the end, but when his spirit like that of the man in the poem swung past the Milky Way to the realms of Pluto I'd warrant there was no what some one else said—what some one else did or thought as he met the dark master's queries. A bow unto himself!" merrily. "A personality." He broke off with a laugh. "That seems about all, he remarked. The rest becomes more by episode and degenerates into mere vague details."
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then sleepy heads. On the waters of the big port the smaller native boats bob around like bundles busy in a garden. Occupying the more open spaces the hips from the western countries swing with an air of grave sobriety at their anchorage.
The man in the little shop referred to is absorbed in a paper from "Home" America. His gaze is arrested by a headline: "The Goldberg pearls. . . . Mysteriously returned after more than four years." The line straight eyes lift from the sheet. The man's expression is one of ironical disapproval of modern enterprising newspaper methods. Then, suppressing a yawn, he sits with a contemplative look on his slightly whimsical, clean-cut features.
Has he ever thought of that occasion since? His eyes, somewhat graver though filled with a lively interest in all things that have life follow the multitude, brown, yellow, white. The bare feet of the ricksha boys patter, patter. There's a rhythm in the sound, it soothes, kills. A Chinaman with a sage suggestive of the inherited calm of generations of tranquil ancestors comes slowly about amid the parterre of silks and priests' robes, vases and other superb ancient art pieces. A sign? Rather a tiny museum, a room of delight and treasures.
"Let me see, Ting's Elder Brother. How long is it since we have been partners?" said Bruce.
"Nearly ten years."
"And in that time we have amassed a few pretty pennies?"

The Chinaman imperturbably measured an amount.
"Quite a princely fortune," commented the man on the stool. "The people of your country are ideal business partners," he laughed. "One puts a little money with them, and it grows like a snowball you haven't even helped roll along."
"The collection of vases and other articles the master left before he went to the new world were very fine," said the other in the smoothest dialect of Canton.
"They must have been," was the lazy reply, "since you got nearly \$100,000 for purchases made by me for a few hundred dollars on one of my exploring expeditions into the interior. Truly thou art a prince of merchants, oh, Ting's Elder Brother, and a wizard day was it for me when I established you here! An excellent contract of mine, that of equal profits for setting you up! And the joke of it is," I laughed the man on the stool, "I really thought I was doing you a favor—that never a dollar that went into the venture would ever come out again. I really forgot all about you and the little shop until one day in New York"—his face graver—"a letter came, saying something about good business in China."
"It is I and my brothers who owe much to the master," said the oriental muskily. "Did he not save?"
"Your honorable and illustrious father, the benevolent pirate?" rising. "True, Heigho!" he yawned. "The sleeping partner, having become opulent, is also once more getting restless."
"The master has only been back from one of his journeys about a week."
"A week? It has seemed a year."
"Well," sententiously, "if the master must go so soon again in the town of Tello, near the borders of Tibet, there is, I have heard, an honorable family who have had for many generations three ancient vases."
Which, if you got, you could set your own price on for some barbarian American? Good. My countrymen must have works of art. Ting's elder brother. And to get these there may be offered an adventure. Besides—the stopped, thinking of a delicate, secret service then engrossing him, work he had taken upon himself through motives of patriotism for his government at Washington.
The powers at home were interested, curious, to the awakening of China. They wanted to know much and to do a great deal. Disdaining compensation for his services, Bruce had mixed somewhat in the game between nations, never outwardly, but secretly, with true oriental subtlety. He understood these people, liked and trusted them, and they knew him.
News from home? He continued to regard the sheet. Faltry news, that told him only of what he already knew. Singly, to the public unexplainable, repayments to Goldberg, Morrow, Page and others. Instead of Morrow, for example, returning to the widows and orphans what that eminently respectable gentleman and pillar of society had stolen through his big asphalt swindle, it had been he (Bruce) after all who had made restitution from his own pocketbook. His poor socialistic theories. As excellent as any, perhaps a little better.
Had he ever really believed in or cared for them? The end justifying the means? Or had the sardonic jest of it all, the risks, the mad excitement, appealed to an odd, wild, seemingly untamable substratum in his nature? Who might say? Bruce touched the paper with his foot. Faltry news, indeed!
"Well, I'll go now and pack the little bag," he murmured. Life, after all, was mostly made up of packing and unpacking a grip.
[To be concluded.]



"Goodby, Mrs. Happy-For-a-Thousand-Years," he laughed.

A Mysterious Disappearance

By GORDON HOLMES



NEXT WEEK We Present to Our Readers the Absorbing Problem of "What Became of Lady Dyke?"

Her Complete Vanishment Leads Claude Bruce, Gifted With Detective Powers, to Uncover a Strange Case of Duplicity.

Start It at the Beginning!