

PARROT & CO

HAROLD MACGRATH

Author of *The Carpet from Bagdad*,
The Place of Honeymoons, etc.

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SYNOPSIS.

Warrington, an American adventurer, and James, his servant, with a caged parrot, the trio known up and down the Irrawaddy as Parrot & Co., are bound for Rangoon. Elsa Chetwood, rich American girl tourist, sees Warrington and asks the parrot to introduce her. He tells her that Warrington has beaten a syndicate and sold his oil claims for \$20,000. Warrington puts Rajah, the parrot, through his tricks for Elsa and they pass two golden days together on the river. In Rangoon, Warrington interferes in a row over cards caused by an enemy, Newell Craig. Elsa is annoyed by Craig and stabs him with a hatpin. Warrington discovers Elsa on the Singapore steamer. He avoids her. Craig is aboard and is warned by Warrington who ceases to avoid Elsa. Craig stirs up evil gossip. Elsa tells Warrington of the hatpin incident and he hunts up Craig, on murder bent. He finds him stretched out drunk on deck and turns the hose on him. At Penang Mallow, who drove Warrington from his plantation when he learned his story, comes aboard. Warrington tells Elsa that Mallow and Craig both will tell that he spent money that did not belong to him over the gambling table to Craig, and asks her not to speak to him again. Mallow baits Warrington, who keeps his temper. At Singapore Elsa calls on her father's old friend the American consul general. Mallow calls and relates the steamer gossip about Elsa. Warrington also calls and sends a cable to the Andes Construction company, offering to restore the stolen money if they will lift the ban.

CHAPTER XIII—Continued.

"And a man may break any one of these laws. I consider it horribly unfair."

"So it is. But if you wish to live in peace, you must submit."

"Peace at that price I have no wish for. This man Mallow lives within the pale of law; the other man is outside of it. Yet, of the two, which would you be quickest to trust?"

The consul general laughed. "Now you are appealing not to my knowledge of the world but to my instinct."

"Thanks."

"Is there any reason why you should defend Mr. Warrington, as he calls himself?"

The consul general's wife desperately tried to catch her husband's eye. But either he did not see the glance or he purposely ignored it.

"In defending Mr. Warrington I am defending myself. My dear friend, Elsa went on, letting warmth come into her voice once more, "my sympathy went out to that man. He looked so lonely. Did you notice his eyes? Can a man look at you the way he does and be bad?"

"I have seen Mallow dozens of times. I know him to be a scoundrel of sorts; but I doubt if bald sunlight could make him blink. Larsa has first to overcome the flickering and wavering of the eyes."

"He said almost the same thing. Would he say that if he were a liar?"

"I haven't accused him of being that. Indeed, he struck me as a truthful young man. By the way, what is the name of the firm your father founded?"

"The Andes Construction company. Do you think we could find him something to do there?" eagerly. "He builds bridges."

"I shouldn't advise that. But we have gone astray. You ought not to see him again."

"It is a hateful world!" Elsa appealed to the wife.

"It is, Elsa, dear. But James is right."

"You'll get your balance," said the guardian, "when you reach home. When's the wedding?"

"I'm not sure that I'm going to be married." Elsa twirled the sunshade again. "Oh, bother with it all! Dinner at eight, in the big dining room."

"Yes. But the introductions will be made on the cafe veranda. These people out here have gone mad over cocktails. And look your best, Elsa. I want them to see a real American girl tonight. I'll have some roses sent up to you."

Elsa had not the heart to tell him that all interest in his dinner had suddenly gone from her mind; that even the confusion of the colonel no longer appealed to her bitter malice. She knew that she was going to be bored and miserable.

When she was gone, the consul general's wife said: "Poor girl!"

Her husband looked across the room interestedly. "Why do you say that?"

"I am a woman."

"That phrase is the City of Refuge. All women fly to it when confronted by something they do not understand."

"Oh, but I do understand. And that's the pity of it."

CHAPTER XIV.

According to the Rules.

Elsa sought the hotel rickshaw stand, selected a sturdy coolie, and asked to be run to the botanical gardens and back. She wanted to be alone, wanted breathing space, wanted

upon more than one occasion, for the solidity of his structures, the colonel realized definitely the seriousness of his crucifixion. He sat stiffer and stiffer in his chair, and the veins in his nose grew deeper and deeper in hue. He saw clearly that he would never understand American women. He had committed an outrageous blunder. He, instead of dominating, had been dominated by three faultfinding old women; and, without being aware of the fact, had looked at things from their point of view. A most inconceivable blunder. He would not allow that he was being swayed less by the admission of his unpardonable rudeness on board than by the immediate knowledge that Elsa was known to the British official's sister, a titled lady who stood exceedingly high at court.

"Miss Chetwood," he said, lowering his voice for her ears only.

Elsa turned, but with the expression that signified that her attention was engaged elsewhere.

"Yes?"

"I am an old man. I am sixty-two; and most of these sixty-two I have lived roughly; but I am not too old to realize that I have made a fool of myself."

Interest began to fill Elsa's eyes.

"It has been said," he went on, keeping the key, "that I am a man of courage, but I find that I need a good deal of that just now. I have been rude to you, and without warrant, and I offer you my humble apologies." He fumbled with his cravat as if it had suddenly tightened. "Will you accept?"

"Instantly," Elsa understood the quality of courage that had stirred the colonel. But ruthlessly: "I should, however, like your point of view in regard to what you consider my conduct."

"Is it necessary?"

"I believe it would be better for my understanding if you made a full confession." She did not mean to be relentless, but her curiosity was too strong not to press her advantage.

"Well, then, over here as elsewhere in the world there are standards by which we judge persons who come under our notice."

"Agreed. Individuality is not generally understandable."

"By the mediocre, you might have added. That's the difficulty with individuality; it refuses to be harnessed by mediocrity and mediocrity holds the whip-hand, always. I represent the mediocre."

"Oh, never!" said Elsa animatedly. "Mediocrity is always without courage."

"You are wrong. It has the courage of its convictions."

"Neither is it not stubbornness, with refusal to recognize things as they are?"

He countered the question with another. "Supposing we were all individuals, in the sense you mean? Supposing each of us did exactly as he pleased? Can you honestly imagine a more confusing place than this world would be? The Manchurian pony is a wild little beast, an individual if ever there was one; but man tames him and puts to use his energies. And so it is with human individuality. We of the mediocre tame and harness and make it useful to the general welfare of humanity. And when we encounter the untamable, in order to safeguard ourselves, we must turn it back into the wilderness, an outlaw. Indeed, I might call individuality an element, like fire and water and air."

"But who conquer fire and water and air?" Elsa demanded, believing she had him pocketed.

"Mediocrity, through the individual of this or that being. Humanity in the bulk is mediocre. And odd as it seems, individuality (which is another word for genius) believes it leads mediocrity. But it cannot be made to understand that mediocrity ordains the leadership."

"Then you contend that in the hands of the stupid lies the balance of power?"

"Let us not say stupid, rather the unimaginative, the practical and the plodding. The stubbornest person in the world is one with an idea."

"Do you honestly insist that you are mediocre?"

"No," thoughtfully. "I am one of those stubborn men with ideas. I merely insist that I prefer to accept the tenets of mediocrity for my own peace and the peace of others."

Elsa forgot those about her, forgot her intended humiliation of the man at her side. He denied that he was an individual, but he was one, as interesting a one as she had met in a very long time. She, too, had made a blunder. Quick to form opinions, swift to judge, she stood guilty with the common lot, who permit impressions instead of evidence to sway them. Here was a man.

"We have gone far afield," she said, a tacit admission that she could not refute his dissertations. This knowledge, however, was not irksome.

"Rather have we not come to the bars? Shall we let them down? In the civil and military life on this side of the world there are many situations which we perform most tolerate. But these, mind you, are settled conditions. It is upon new ones which arise that we pass judgment. I knew nothing about you, nothing whatever. So I

judged you according to the rules."

Elsa leaned upon her elbows, and she smiled a little as she noted that the purple had gone from his nose and that it had resumed its accustomed rubeundity.

"I go on. A woman who travels alone, who does not present letters of introduction, who . . ."

"Who attends strictly to her own affairs. Go on."

Imperturbably he continued: "Who seeks the acquaintance of men who do not belong, as you Americans say."

"Not men; one man," she corrected.

"A trifling difference. Well, it arouses a disagreeable word, suspicion. For look, there have been examples. It isn't as if yours were an isolated case. There have been examples, and these we apply to such affairs as come under our notice."

"And it doesn't matter that you may be totally wrong?"

His prompt answer astonished her. "No, it does not matter in the least. Simmered down, it may be explained in a word, appearances. And I must say, to the normal mind . . ."

"The mediocre mind."

"To the normal and mediocre mind, appearances were against you. Observe, please, that I did not know I was wrong, that you were a remarkable young woman. My deductions were made from what I saw as an outsider. On the Irrawaddy you made the acquaintance of a man who came out here a fugitive from justice. After you made his acquaintance, you sought none other, in fact, repelled any advances. This alone decided me."

"Then you were decided?" To say that this blunt exposition was not bitter to her taste, that it did not act like acid upon her pride, would not be true. She was hurt, but she did not let the hurt befog her sense of justice. From his point of view the colonel was in no fault. "Let me tell you how very wrong you were indeed."

"Doubtless," he hastily interposed, "you enveloped the man in a cloud of romance."

"On the contrary, I spoke to him and sought his companionship because he was nothing more nor less than a ghost."

"Ah! Is it possible that you knew him in former times?"

"No. But he was so like the man at home; so identical in features and build to the man I expected to go home to marry. . . ."

"My dear young lady, you are right. Mediocrity is without imagination, stupid, and makes the world a dull place indeed. What woman in your place would have acted otherwise? Instead of one apology I offer a thousand."

"I accept each and all of them. More, I believe that you and I could get on capitally. I can very well imagine the soldier you used to be. I am going to ask you what you know about Mr. Warrington."

"This, that he is not a fit companion for a young woman like yourself; that a detracting rumor follows hard upon his heels wherever he goes. I learned something about him in Rangoon. He is known to the riff-raff as Parrot & Co., and I don't know what else. All of us on shipboard learned his previous history. And not from respectable quarters, either."

"If I had been elderly and without physical attractions?" Elsa inquired sarcastically.

"We are dealing with human nature, mediocrity, and not with speculation. It is in the very nature of things to distrust that which we do not understand. You say, old and without physical attractions. Beauty is of all things most drawing. We crowd about it, we crown it, we flatter it. The old and unattractive we pass by. If I had not seen you here tonight, heard you talk, saw in a kind of rebellious enchantment over your knowledge of the world and your distinguished acquaintance, I should have gone to my grave believing that my suspicions were correct. I dare say that I shall make the same mistake again."

"Did you learn among other things what Mr. Warrington had done?"

"Yes. A sordid affair. Ordinary peccations that were wasted over gaming tables."

Warrington had told her the truth. At least, the story told by others coincided with his own. But what was it that kept doubt in her mind? Why should she not be ready to believe what others believed, what the man himself had confessed? What was it to her that he looked like Arthur, that he was guilty or innocent?

"And his name?" She wondered if the colonel knew that also.

"Warrington is assumed. His real name is Paul Ellison."

"Paul Ellison." She repeated it slowly. Her voice did not seem her own. The table, the lights, the faces, all receded and became a blur.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Probably Mamma Knew.

Little Elsa—"My papa's a minister, and that is best." Little Grace—"My papa's a lawyer, and that's best, too." Little Elsie—"No, your papa is not a really lawyer; he just practices law. But my papa is a really minister, because he just preaches and never practices. My mamma says so."—Judge.

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