Soul of the Blue Bokhara

By FRANK LOVELL NELSON

One of Carlton Clarke's Telepatho-Deductive Solutions

CARLTON CLARKE and I were in New York—I knew not why—at the time Col. James Watson Drexlau, an immensely wealthy New Yorker, was found stabbed to death in his home. His daughter and Ranleigh Harcamp were the first upon the scene of the murder. We became connected with the case through my acquaintance with Collins, friend of my youth and one of the best reporters in Manhattan. Clarke and I were discussing the strange mystery which had grown out of the case.

A knock on the door put an end to our conversation. It was Collins, to whom I had given a quiet tip to stay with us through the case.

Another knock followed almost immediately, and I admitted Ranleigh Harcamp, whose face showed the first smile I had seen him give when he related the ease with which he had eluded Clancy's shadows.

"Now, Mr. Harcamp," began Clarke, "I want you to tell us exactly what happened last night."

"I cannot," said Harcamp, between set teeth.

"Then I will have to tell you. Sit down, Mr. Harcamp."

"When you and Miss Drexlau returned from the theater," continued Clarke, "Mr. Drexlau met you and a violent scene occurred. Is that right?"

"Yes, I suppose Fogarty has told you."

"Miss Drexlau, at her father's orders, finally went to her room in tears."

"I see by the papers Fogarty was eavesdropping," commented Harcamp.

"Then you and Mr. Drexlau cooled down. He suggested that you go into the billiard room and amuse yourself while he smoked a cigar, and maybe you would both see things in a different light. You became interested in practicing some difficult masse shot and stayed for some time."

"How in the name of heaven do you know all that?"

"Very simple. Balls carefully placed in line along the side rail, tip of cue badly damaged, your fingers covered with chalk. You were just about to attempt the shot after repeated failures when you heard Mr. Drexlau fall. You rushed into the hall and saw fleeing up the stairs—"

Harcamp rose with clenched fists and white face. "Stop, you lie! No man on God's earth knows whom I saw."

"Ha, I thought I was right. You saw Miss Drexlau."

Harcamp groaned and buried his face in his hands. "She didn't do it. She didn't do it. O! why didn't I confess to it and save her?"

Clarke went over and laid a hand on his shoulder. "Now, brace up, Harcamp," he said. "It may not be as bad as you think. There is one thing that may save her."

"Tell me, for God's sake!" moaned Harcamp.

"The blue Bokhara," answered Clarke.

Just then a messenger arrived with a telegram. It was for Clarke and he tore it open feverishly. As he read his face broke into a smile of triumph.

"At last I can act," he cried. "Quick, Mr. Collins, call a cab. You know the nearest stands. Mr. Harcamp, we will save her."

Collins was soon at the door with a carriage. Clarke gave the driver his directions, and we all got in.

"Where are we bound for?" I asked.

"We are in pursuit of the blue Bokhara," was all that Clarke would vouchsafe.

We drew up before a large store in Broadway devoted exclusively to oriental rugs, and hurried in.

"Did you ever see a Blue Bokhara?" asked Clarke of the proprietor.

"Yes," he replied, "but we haven't one. In fact I never saw but one I believed was genuine, and that didn't bring very good luck to the man that bought it, for I hear he's just been murdered."

"Yes, yes, that's the one!" said Clarke, exultantly.

"Did he get it here?"

"No, he didn't. He picked it up from a small dealer, but there was considerable talk about it among rug men, and I went around to see it. I've seen many so-called blue Bokharas, but never one like this. It was the softest shade of blue and of the finest wool mixed with silk. The sheen was perfect."

"Yes, yes," interrupted Clarke; "but can you tell me the name of the shop that sold it?"

"Certainly; it was Agnossi's, on lower Washington street; but he hasn't anything like it. Let me show you some particularly fine Bokharas I have just imported."

But we were gone on our way to Agnossi's before he recovered from his surprise, I suspect.

Agnossi was a dark-eyed Armenian who kept a small stock. He was proud of having sold the most wonderful rug in New York, proud of having known the murdered man and anxious to tell all about both.

"But while it was in your hands did you repair it?" asked Clarke, interrupting his flow of description.

"Oh, no, gentlemen, it was perfect, perfect. I have been dealing in rugs all my life and—"

"But haven't you even a thread of it; even a strand of wool?"

"Why, no. You ask funny questions. More funny than young man who come here every day I get the rug and ask the price and cry when I tell him I sold it to Mr. Drexlau. And to think of Mr. Drexlau so soon killed! I like to have the pick of his rugs. It make me rich."

"From whom did you get the rug?" broke in Clarke.

The Armenian's eyes kindled with suspicion. "What for you want to know that?" he said.

"Now," said Clarke, "tell me where you got the rug or I'll put the spell on you and leave you that way."

"Oh, I'll tell, I'll tell," said the frightened Oriental. "I had it of Israel Fangbone in Pell street."

"A well-known fence," said Collins.

"If we find you've been lying I'll come back and look into your head and see everything you've ever done," warned Clarke.

"Oh, gentlemen, I tell the truth; and listen, I did repair it. Fangbone, he cut a little piece out of it, such a little piece. I weave it in and Mr. Drexlau never see it at all. I think Fangbone try to match the wool and get some fake ones made."

"A scheme that you doubtless suggested," said Clarke. "Now, haven't you that piece?"

"Oh, no, gentlemen. I gif you my word of honor. Fangbone he have it."

"Then to Pell street," commanded Clarke.

"I'm afraid you'll find Fangbone a tougher proposition than the Armenian," said Collins when we were once more in the cab.

"If he is a strong character his weak point is the more vulnerable," replied Clarke. "When I see him I will know where to attack."

Fangbone in truth was a veritable Fagin. He treated us with twisting, truculent hands, which seemed to itch, and his inky-black board to bristle at the gain that might be derived from such a presentable set of rounders as he took us to be.

"Somedings I can show you, shentlemens? Some moneys you want, maybe? I haf it."

Clarke made a careful survey of his antagonist. "Yes, Fangbone, it's money. Twenty dollars on this," and Clarke took a diamond ring from his finger and laid it in the moist, outstretched palm.

Fangbone examined it critically, but with greedy eyes. "You haf come by it honestly?" he asked.

"Of course. You'll be safe enough anyway. It's easily worth two hundred and I may never redeem it."

"Not reteem id?" said Fangbone in surprise.

"No. I wouldn't wear it again. It's kishef. I had it of this man Drexlau who was killed last night, and I just heard he had a blue Bokhara rug that was kishef and it killed him."

"You say the blue Bokhara is a kishef? Who dell you dat?"

"Thalda told me."

A look of fear stole over Fangbone's forbidding countenance and his eyes wandered involuntarily toward a drawer back of the counter in front of which we were standing.

"Here, dake id, dake id, quick!" he said, thrusting the ring at Clarke. "I will haf nodding to do vid id. Thalda she know. She is wise in de black magic as in de white. Tank Gott I find id out in time."

As soon as we were beyond the line of vision from the interior Clarke stopped and accosted a typical Pell street hobo. "Here, my man," he said, "want to make a half a dollar? Well, wander into Fangbone's, take in whatever he gives you, bring it to me and you get your money." The hobo hurried off and Clarke's scheme began to dawn upon me. In a few minutes he was back. "Here's wat de sheeny give me. Now, where's de mazuma?"

Clarke handed him the money and in return the man placed in Clarke's hand a square inch of the blue Bokhara!

"Superstition, his ruling passion, and a powerful name in the Ghetto," quietly remarked Clarke. "Now the solution is in our grasp."

We stopped before one of those old-fashioned New York houses, once the home of fashion and yet to be found in the lower East side. Clarke sent up his card and we were admitted to a drawing room furnished in a quiet magnificence that contrasted strangely with the squalor and degradation all about.

The silken portieres parted and there stood before us the most beautiful woman I had ever seen.

Clarke started up and took a step toward her. Their eyes met.

"Thalda!"

"Carlton!"

"You had my wires?"

"Not until I got home this morning. I've been away. And you alive!"

"It has brought me and my friends. Let them be your friends, Thalda!"

Concentrating his mind, Carlton Clarke gazed steadily into her eyes for a few moments. Her muscles became tense, her face pallid and her eyes glassy, and then they closed in what appeared to be the sleep of nature. Clarke took the square of blue Bokhara from his pocket and pressed it against her forehead.

"Do you see, Thalda?"

"I see," came the rich, subdued voice.

"What see you?"

"I see a richly appointed drawing room. Oriental rugs cover the floor. Over the fireplace is a picture of Washington. A white pilastered archway leads into a library and that opens into a conservatory. Three persons are there. One is an old man, one a young man and one a woman, young, slender and black of hair. They seem to be disputing and the old man is greatly excited. At last he points to the door and his daughter—yes it is his daughter—goes out in tears, with one last supplicating look at the men. There they part, not all in anger, as the father seems to weaken at the sight of his daughter's tears. The young man goes out through the library and the aged man lights a cigar and walks the drawing room with bowed head, his hands behind his back.

"He halts in his walk and listens. He slips across the room on tiptoe, tears open the portiere at the hall door and drags out a little old man. He is a servant! The master of the house upbraids the cringing menial and then points to the door. The little old man goes out. The tall man resumes his restless walk, blowing rings of smoke and now and then glancing at his watch and from that to the door. He expects some one. At last he stops. He listens. He hears a step. He goes out into the hall to the front door and rings it open. A dark-muffled form enters."

"Mark well this man, Thalda. What is he like?"

"He is dark, very dark. He is emaciated. His face is drawn with suffering. His clothes are in rags, yet his bearing is proud and noble. They pass into the drawing room. The dark man is pleading with clasped hands. The old man laughs scornfully. The dark figure offers him something. It is money. The old man again refuses him and points toward the door. The dark man still pleads with many passionate gestures toward a blue rug of surpassing beauty on the floor. At last the old man advances and raises his hand as if to strike. There is a quick blow and a flash of steel. The old man reels and falls, clutching at his breast. The dark man seizes the rug and is gone into the night."

"Now the rug, Thalda, the rug. Follow it. Trace it back to the making. What see you?"

"I see a little hut in Bokhara beside the Samarkand gate. I know the spot well. Within the door a loom is placed and there, day by day, a maiden weaves upon a rug. She is beautiful as the night, and as she weaves a youth watches her and strokes the inky braids of her hair while their eyes speak the language of love that is old as this old world, yet ever new.

"Day by day the maiden weaves, and as she weaves her fair body wastes by degrees so small that her lover sees not the change. At last the final knot is tied and the weft thrown through the warp for the last time, and with a sigh and a look of love the weaver falls into his outstretched arms.

"She has woven her soul into the blue Bokhara.

"The youth wanders, the rug always with him, for it is his bride. He comes to this city. He is in want; he is starving. When near to death he pawns the rug that he may live. Then the change comes. He finds work, he makes money. He tries to redeem the rug, but the man to whom he pawned it is a villain. He has learned the value of the rug and will not give it up but for a great price. The youth struggles and saves and denies himself everything until at last he has the sum. At last he is able to buy the rug, only to find that it is sold—yes, it is to the man who was slain. The youth seeks him out and, by the ruse that he has, smuggled rugs for sale, gains entrance at midnight."

"Where is he now? Look well, Thalda."

"He is near."

"The street; can you read it?"

"It is Washington street, in the Armenian quarter."

"The number?"

"Two hundred and sixty-eight."

"The name?"

"I cannot tell. Wait, he writes. He signs. 'Kareton Boyajian.' He faints. You must hasten if you see him."

"The floor?"

"It is the garret. I am weary, Carlton; make haste."

"Enough, Thalda. Wake."

The eyes opened and smiled.

"Have I helped?" she asked.

"You have made all clear. But we must act now. To-morrow I will return and tell you all. And, oh, Thalda, that I may then persuade you to give up this sordid life, this preying upon the ignorance and fear of the Orientals."

"You see the results—luxury, wealth, all that we longed for in the old days. But come to-morrow."

The final act of the drama was brief. We communicated with the inspector and he met us on the way to the Washington street number in Clarke's possession. This proved to be a rickety tenement. Under the guidance of the inspector, we entered boldly and mounted five dingy flights to the garret. A knock at the one door brought no response and we pushed in as it was unlocked.

There, on a miserable bed of straw, his wasted body wrapped in the blue Bokhara, lay a young Turkoman. By the sickly light of one guttering candle it was plain that we were none too soon, as the finger of death already was upon his forehead.

Clarke stepped to him and, gently raising his head, poured brandy down his throat. His eyes roved until they lighted upon the uniform and star of the inspector.

"You have come for me," he said weakly. "You are too late. I am going to join my love."

The last words ended in a gurgle and he was dead in Clarke's arms. Starvation and want had done their work.

"And if any further evidence is needed, Inspector, here it is," said Collins, as he picked from the straw a blood-stained stiletto.

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The blue Bokhara is on our floor now and Clarke thinks that time and use will restore its wonderful luster.

We saw Miss Drexlau once more before leaving New York, when she came with Ranleigh Harcamp to express her thanks to Clarke. She was in deep mourning, but even under her burden of grief radiant with her new-found love.

"Had I only been a moment sooner I might have saved him," she told us. "I was ready for bed when I thought of a box of candy I had left in the hall. I threw on a loose house gown and started down after it. On the way down I heard papa fall, but I thought it was a noise in the street. Then I heard Mr. Harcamp coming from the billiard room and I flew back. Do you know, Ranleigh, I thought—but only for a moment—"

Clarke went alone that afternoon to make his promised call on Thalda. When he returned he was humming a little tune, a frivolous little tune for Clarke.

"Do you know, old chap," he said, "I begin to think this trip to New York will not prove altogether a failure."

"Then it was Thalda that brought us to New York?"

"Yes, Sexton, it was Thalda," and a pang of jealousy, jealousy of them both, shot through me.

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