

## Opals of Arragon

By ARTHUR JAMES HAYES  
Illustrated by J. Allen St. John



THE Moorish dancing girl—erstwhile favorite of Sahdir Hafiz, former lord of Khan Azar Castle, whose skeleton now reposed in the mud of the moat—swayed languorously to the music of two harps and a lute. It was a capital performance and the retainers of Juan de Ojeda applauded right lustily. The dancing girl was a slender, cream-tinted creature, with the liquid eyes and full lips that bespeak the true Circassian.

She had learned her art under the incomparable Kanazi of Constantinople, whose black eunuchs were schooled to stand on the edge of the velvet mat, ready to flick an ungracefully postured hip or shoulder with a lash that tortured like vitriol. Ayaari, they called her, and Sahdir Hafiz had purchased her with silk bales and gold, pirated in the blue waters of the western Mediterranean.

It had been an indiscreet investment, for even then the legions of Arragon were stirring, inspired by the eloquence of the padres who preached holy war against the Saracens, then desecrating Christian soil with pagan rites. In the sacking of Khan Azar—part of it was consecrated as a mosque—the warriors of the black-bearded de Ojeda fairly outdid themselves. Of all who lived within the castle when the pennons of Arragon fluttered in the breeze the morning of the attack, but one survived the sunset.

That one was Ayaari, Circassian chattel, and creature of many men in diverse moods. Don de Ojeda himself tried to caress her, and she scratched his bearded face in parallel rows until the blood trickled into his curly beard. The proudest dames of Castile had smiled upon De Ojeda. He took it ill that a Moorish dancing girl should mar his features.

"Madre de Dios!" he howled. "Trice up this spitting hell-cat and let her learn through the hide the folly of fighting the flower of Spanish nobility!"

Ayaari accepted the flogging—administered with military pomp and publicity—with inscrutable eyes and a stoic refusal to faint or wax hysterical that compelled the admiration of the rough soldiers of the Velvet Duke. He himself professed vastly enhanced esteem for the chastened damsel.

"Such spirit!" he declaimed in his cups, "is worthy of Christian saint no less than of damned Saracen infidels. She is a worthy ornament to any household. Look you well that you covet me not the possession of her, or Toledo steel will ring a requiem in the court!"

So far as Ayaari was concerned, the scratching episode, with its painful and humiliating denouement, was a mere incident, cosmic with a dancing girl's garbled universe. She found the big, bearded Spaniard rather preferable to the sallow, slender and almost effeminate Moorish nobleman. And after the drunken banquets it befitted her sensual pride that she should sway so alluringly in scantiest of draperies, coveted by the bravest warriors of Arragon and Castile.

For these occasions the duke himself brought from the treasure chest of the De Ojeda house the most wonderful of corselets. It was linked over the girl's slender neck and rounded breasts with tiny chains of hammered gold. From the throat to the waist it glittered green and red and purple, like the fires of Vesuvius at dusk. When first the bearded Spaniard flashed it before her eyes Ayaari blinked as blinded.

"Opals!" he boomed; "two hundred odd, and the largest and finest in all the world. No sultan's favorite ere wore the like! He slipped them over the jet hair and creamy shoulders and stood back to watch the effect.

The girl stood limned against the crimson draperies and threw back her rounded arms, so that the great glowing stones would click and glitter. Her lips were raised temptingly, and in her shadowy eyes, lengthened with powdered amber and lamplack, burned a feline consciousness of her grace. De Ojeda, lover of many women, encircled her in his arms. Against his chain mail the opal chains rasped and tinkled.

"Infidel though you are," he swore with bearded lips, "the virgin herself was not more beautiful."

With her soft arms around his neck, Ayaari stared past him. The parted portieres revealed a thin, sallow face, tapering to a Van Dyke beard. Her subtle, dark eyes met his shrewd blue ones and then turned as abruptly away. The furtive glance was that of Pedro the Blonde, hero of strange voyages to newly discovered and far-off America. In the eight

years that men had come and gone in Khan Azar, during De Ojeda's regime, Ayaari had seen none so handsome.

Together, upon the highest castellated tower, where the moonlight cast concealing purple shadows, they talked of the new world.

"The Opals of Arragon," whispered Pedro, "they are fair indeed against your olive skin and scanty enough garb at best, as the saints will bear me witness. But in Cadiz they would outfit two twelve-gun caravels. You will sail with me—not north, as other fools are sailing, but south again, from Hispaniola. There is the true El Dorado!"

"In—in this El Dorado," whispered Ayaari, "are there any women beautiful as me?" Ayaari had known many men.

"By all accounts," responded Pedro the Blonde, "they are all coffee-colored creatures with flat faces." Pedro had been a court gallant and he knew well the feminine heart.

"Then I go with you," whispered the girl, and she raised her red lips for his kiss.

The white moon of Arragon cast shadows along the corridor. Juan de Ojeda sped swiftly after the spritelike form of Ayaari. Ever she was ahead of him, alluring, tantalizing, her slender figure garbed in red silk and encircled with the pale flame of the opals. De Ojeda's cheeks were flushed with the red wine and words of love stumbled over his thick lips into the black beard.

"Thou art beautiful," he reiterated, only half-comprehendingly. "Beautiful and fiery as the Opals of Arragon. I—"

Pedro's Toledo blade, biting suddenly out of the purple shadows, sliced his gleaming mail like silk. Then horses clattered over the drawbridge and a man and a girl sped across the moat where reposed the bones of Sahdir Hafiz, erstwhile lord of Khan Azar.

The ponderous galleon yawed sluggishly, fired a desultory volley, and then made hopeless efforts at flight. The trimmer and smaller craft closed rapidly, firing broadside after broadside into the oak-ribbed Spaniard. Wearing round her stern with easy assurance, so low as to foil the deflected cannonades of the Dona, the pirate craft poured in a raking fire. Flames licked up the open ports of the treasure ship and glowed luridly on the high poop.

Blackbeard, his red face aglow with demoniacal triumph, the tapers alight in his long, curly whiskers, supplicated the devil for victory and led the boarders. The burning spars of the galleon lit the bloody decks as the buccaneers poured over the side. The huddled knot of soldiers and sailors made but feeble resistance.

In the after cabins the returning Governor of Hispaniola attempted the last act of mercy for his daughter, Urraca Celeste. But the blade of the dagger, just as it reached the pendant of the great rope of opals, was knocked aside.

"Would you spoil so pretty a damsel when Blackbeard himself covets her?"

In the dimly-lit cabin the face of Blackbeard, lighted by the wax tapers that flamed in his beard and hair, looked like the fiend from hell that the Spaniards believed him to be.

"Mother of God!" screamed the girl. She clutched for the knife that had fallen from Governor General Estremaduro's nerveless hand. But she had failed of her purpose. Blood was spattered over the elderly Castilian gentleman's gray beard and on the immaculate creases of his white ruff. He swayed forward and fell upon the leopard skin rug. His silks and velvets gleamed in the light of the burning shrouds.

Blackbeard grasped one white shoulder with a huge fist and turned the half-conscious girl around to the door. The thick, bloody fingers of the other hand, trembling with drunken eagerness, fingered the opal corselet. They reflected the light of the tapers in a thousand splinters of flame, as if the eyes of the damned looked through them aglitter with satisfaction over the evil end of another tall ship of old Castile.

It was dawn in the Caribbean when Blackbeard's buccaneers rowed their loot back to the Merrie Anne. Against the still gray western sky the Spanish treasure galleon was an inferno of crackling flame. Suddenly the powder magazine hurled its maniac might against the oak ribs of the flaming hulk. Embers rose skyward for a thousand feet, then drifted like miniature comets over the surface of the gleaming sea.

Some of them dropped into the long-boats, causing the buccaneers to curse villainously and slap them out with crimson hands. In the stern sat Blackbeard the Damned with the sole survivor of

the Santa Veronica, the lady Urraca Celeste of the ancient house of Estremaduro. She sobbed weakly in the last stages of exhausted emotion.

Anon her lips moved silently, supplicating the virgin for the succor that had not been forthcoming from the young gallants who had paid her court in the brief months she had lived as mistress of her father's household. Lady Urraca was 18 years of age, beautiful as dawn in the tropic seas and innocent as the seclusion of the convent at Madrid well might make her.

She slept at last, and in his cabin

was the most callous and bloodthirsty in the business.

Women sauntered with them—simpler mestizas, fiery Spanish girls, hard-eyed English convicts, bound for slavery under the lash in Virginia and diverted by capture to freedom and license in the Virgin Isles; listless and dispirited gentlewomen, part of the "loot" of some sanguinary encounter with honest merchantmen; women black and yellow and pink-and-white, all eagerly embracing or utterly resigned to the life they led, all creatures of idle fancy and potential vic-

crow's-nest coverts, amid the palms, the scrutiny for avenging frigates was ceaselessly maintained.

Only Blackbeard himself flew the Jolly Roger in port. He boasted when far gone in rum that the devil and he had a thorough understanding of the race he was to run. But always he swore that it was but at the beginning, and he had full fifty years ahead of him. Yet when he awoke in the night he screamed that the evil one was at his throat and sat up with the beads of sweat trickling down his chalky face into his long beard.

With returning dawn came his old as-

Into the great bonfire beyond maudlin men hurled silks and lincens, intricately wrought chairs and priceless paintings. Fed by the rare oils and unguents, the lurid flames leaped higher. Around and around, in wild frenzy, danced pirates, former convicts and "men of color." Women danced with them, screaming and gyrating until they fell unconscious and were dragged away by the heels.

Over other tumults, oyer mock prayers and livid curses and fo'c'sle chantays, rose the great voice of Blackbeard, taunting Leach to make good his promise. Suddenly a giant negro approached. A bugle sounded shrilly, and the assemblage, save only a few drunken roisterers who shouted on heedlessly, became silent.

The giant negro bore a bundle in his arms, all wrapped in red velvet. This he unwound leisurely. Something within stirred and struggled. Then, as if she had been a toy, he whisked away the last fold and placed a slender, yellow-haired woman on her feet in the full glare of the flames.

In the red light her hair and figure looked like a statue graven out of whitest ivory and redder gold. Only the girl's eyes faltered of the illusion of a graven image. They were wide and stark with fear and hate. Yet calmly they swept over the assemblage. It seemed that power of movement was denied the slender limbs.

"The Lady Marie Gonzales d' Estrada!" shouted Leach sonorously. "Beside whom all other Port Royal beauties are as Afric wenches."

"Not so!" shouted Blackbeard. "The sea scavenger Leach, looter of native banana outriggers, lies in his throat!"

The assemblage shrieked with delight. From behind the Malabar web-woven screen Blackbeard dragged the struggling and protesting Urraca. About her neck and over her rounded bosom clicked and gleamed the Opals of Arragon, flaming in a thousand molten tints as they vied with the oil-fed flames.

She covered in his grasp, and perceiving that her disheveled hair and crouching posture contrasted but poorly with the other entrants' chill hauteur, he drew her up sharply, pinioning her arms to her sides and turning her toward the drunken throng.

"Blackbeard!" they shouted. "Blackbeard's wench wins!"

All but Leach burst out in laughter. Suddenly the white figure with the yellow hair-crumpled forward on the rich Oriental rug. The other girl glanced dazedly about her. A new light burned in her eyes. She turned and stared at Blackbeard. She lifted one loop of the opals and crunched it in her teeth. Blood trickled from the red lips. But her maniac laughter rose clear above the drunken tumult of the maudlin throng.

In the firelight the Opals of Arragon seemed a corselet of living flame.

Tava, Obeah high priestess, was again seeking herbs for the magic potions to the Great Green Serpent, recently but ill pleased with her sorcery. Tava's prestige on the little island of Anegada was on the wane; another Voodoo priestess from Barbuda having risen high in local favor. Anegada lies out of the beaten path of things. Even the fruit boats disdain it, and occasional tourists venturing over from St. Thomas make haste to leave again, fearing to trust themselves where there are no regularly constituted police or pure whites.

Among the black, dun and tan, the cream, coffee and chocolate colored inhabitants Voodooism is the true religion. Of the rival priestesses Tava, grandmother of the beautiful fawn-colored Rosamar, enjoyed highest favor. Tava's Indian, negro and Arab blood gave her in youth a surpassing beauty and in age an incomparable ugliness. Her daughter, Rita Ann, so named after a member of the Bermuda family in which Tava had served, by reason of the eldest son's fancy, was whiter of skin and fairer of feature. She captivated the mate of a Dutch trader, and of that transient infatuation Rosamar remained as sole evidence.

Rosamar had but recently come to Tava for potions to make a sandy-haired, freckle-faced and unmistakably Caucasian beach-comber steadfast in his rather tentative affections. He had been dropped ashore by a Bahama sponger and had elected to remain where the women were complainant, the hospitality was perennial and the Ten Commandments were nonexistent.

The granddaughter of Tava was a lissome lass, with the small feet and hands that bespoke the blood of the Bermuda planter's family and the full lips that harked back to the Congo jungles.

Her grace was the felix perfection that has made the Alexandria dancing



The hag resumed her stirring of the mystic mess in the kettle.

Blackbeard's lips sprawled over the crumpled rose petal mouth that sighed in dreams and muttered the name of her father and the Holy Mother. Coil against coil clicked the Opals of Arragon, red and green and white in successive moods of fiery light. The pirate chief fingered them thoughtfully.

"Many a fair dame's neck has gleamed with them," he muttered. "Queens and courtesans and the half-caste favorites of the grandees of mighty Spain!"

The Merrie Anne was beating into the trades again, her destination the sordid glories of Port Royal. It was a gala week in the old pirate rendezvous. Ladd was in from the looting of the Grand Mogul convoy, freighted with gold bullion for Madrid, and Leach had dropped anchor after three months in the Brazilian roadstead, levying toll for clearance on all the Portuguese ships that left the colony.

Port Royal—mecca for the fotsam of the world—rejoiced in the coming of the Merrie Anne. For beside Blackbeard's ingenuity for tortures and festivities, the other pirate chiefs were as sucking babes. Up and down the streets swaged the crews of the most dreaded buccaneers and freebooters of those troublous days. Swarthy and fair, blonde and black, appeared in silks from Cadiz and satins from Alexandria, diamonds gleaming on sword hilts and earrings, rubies glittering in solid ropes around their bullock necks, the dandies of the Jolly Roger ogled the half-caste girls and swore blasphemous oaths that their particular chief

times of feminine rivalry or masculine berserker rage.

In the little shops the merchants—unquestioning of the antecedents of the cargoes—sorted and repacked the silks and satins, the wines and spices, the gold bullion and silver bars, the mahogany chests and graven ivory and ornamental clocks inlaid with jade that had concluded tortuous voyages from the Indies, East and West, from all ports of the seven seas, to a final illicit haven in Port Royal.

By tacit understanding these things, once repacked, never found their way back, for it is an axiom of ancient and modern thievery that even the most depraved of criminals must have honest dealings with some one. From any other port in the world the cargoes cleared under peril of capture. From Port Royal they went forth unharmed to a final destination in the colonies or Europe. Once looted and sold, the pirates of the Spanish main kept faith with their "fences" or smuggling go-betweens.

So to Port Royal, city of iniquity, came in time all "gentlemen of fortune." There, they drank the rare vintages of France and Italy, wore the silks of the Orient and gambled the gold of the Incas and the jewels of the Indies—for wines or ships or captive gentlewomen.

Against the green tropic hills floated the fair flags of a score of nations, for only when entering battle did the Jolly Roger fling its leering skull and crossbones to the breeze. Standing off and on in the roadstead was the vigilant sentinel sloop, and on the higher hills, in

assurance, and he spat upon priceless paintings of the saints by Murillo and Velasquez and swore that his terror was but the rum working in his brain. His coming, therefore, rejoiced Port Royal. Leach had many captive women, for it was spring, and the wives and daughters of many a Spanish governor general and port captain had been returning to Spain for the summer months.

He boasted in the Valencia bar that he had brought back the fairest flowers of all Castile. Blackbeard swore vile oaths and said that though he brought but one, he would match her against the wife of the Hispaniola judge, ship for ship and bar for bar, with all Leach's possessions, popular decision to determine the result. The challenge set the city agog. Women sought their jars of powdered flies' feet and burned amber that they themselves, if not contestants, might at least earn the admiring glances of the finest cutthroats that ere smelled powder smoke.

It was an open air festa. The white beach was carpeted with Persian rugs and Moroccan mats, secured from the vagaries of the wind by weights of bar silver and lighted with hundreds of consecrated wax candles, intended originally for the cathedrals of distant Lima. On seats of silk bales, on red mahogany chests, the gay assemblage gathered, drinking Malaga from the bottle and raising their voices in lusty chantays and risque songs.

In the center of the lighted area women danced—bronzed, full-lipped, sensuous creatures, swaying as easily as the slender palms and crazing liquor-fueled blood with their animal abandon. At intervals a pirate would reach out of the laughing circle and grab one, struggling in mock protest, to drag her into the bowers of palm leaves.