

# The ADVENTURE HUNTER

## THE MYSTERY OF THE PERSIAN RUG

By Hamilton Lang

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THE affairs of mystery in which it was the Adventure Hunter's business and pleasure to engage usually came to him in a completed state. That one connected with the Persian rug, however, was an exception. He came upon the rug before its time of mystery. It was lying among other littered things in an exceptionally littered room as he and his artist acquaintance Vereker casually met in the hall of a friend and passed the time of day.

They had paused near the open door of the littered room and the voices in it were sounding clearly.

A small, shabby man was saying that he was going to sell the lot and go out West and that the East was an unmentionable place anyway.

Then Vereker and Valentine Stone together noticed the rug lying on the floor and clearly a part of the general sale. It was dusty and old, but to the eye of a rug lover it shone from its tawdry surroundings like a jewel. It was small and square and intricate in design, a prayer rug of an unusual sort. Vereker and Stone lifted almost simultaneous fingers, each to the other—the sign of future possession by the first to make it. And it was Vereker who by some fractional time signed first. He walked up to the owner.

"I'll give you twenty," said Vereker, "for that rug." The man stared wonderingly, as do dull men to whom events come too fast.

"Go ahead," said he, dully holding out his hand. "I'm crazy, I know," said Vereker, handing over the money, "but all collectors are crazy."

He rolled the purchase up, minute even for prayer rugs, put it under his arm and assumed possession. Stone shook hands with Vereker and proceeded upstairs to his friend's chambers. When he descended again voices of chaffering came from the shabby man's room.

"I'm a dealer," said a strange voice, "and I hear downstairs that you have a sale."

"Sure," answered the shabby man who had owned the rug.

"I'll buy everything you got in a lump," said the dealer concisely.

"Go ahead," said the shabby man.

"And I'll give you," the man paused, "\$200 for everything."

Stone stopped, interested. Two hundred dollars seemed a lot of money for the litter which Stone had noticed when he had paused before at the room.

"Here's your money," said the dealer, taking a yellow roll from his pocket, separating some of its constituent parts and handing them over. "I've got a wagon downstairs. I may as well take it away now, Jim."

He called in the vague direction of the street and there were answering footsteps on the stairs. "I bought the lot, Jim," said the dealer hurriedly. "Take everything. Get busy now; I'll be back before you've done."

"He hurried downstairs, a sweating man, dark and gaunt and quick. Stone followed slowly. "Two hundred dollars for the lot," he thought. "Two hundred dollars for the lot." He kept thinking of that amount; it seemed so much to offer for so little.

He stopped at the door, looking at the wagon which waited outside and at the gaunt, dark dealer hurrying up the street to a nearby corner. "Jim" padded down the stairs, taking to the wagon piles of rubbish, and as Stone watched it and watched it he felt upon him once more one of those strange premonitions that adventure was touching his elbow and beckoning him to follow. So "Jim" deposited his rubbish and ascended for another load, and the gaunt, dark man came hurrying back, and Stone was conscious that he was searching the wagon eagerly, searching and searching till "Jim" again appeared.

"Got the rug this time, Jim?" he asked.

"What rug?" said Jim, stowing a roll of tattered rubbish.

"The small rug," said the gaunt man impatiently, "the little rug with the funny marks."

"Ain't got it," said Jim.

"Ain't got it?" said the man impatiently. "Then get it. It's there somewhere. Get it next time."

But "Jim" appeared next time with unfavorable intelligence.

"There ain't no little rug," said he. "I looked and there ain't none. I got all the rugs there is."

But the dark and gaunt and sweating man was already up the steps and was mounting the staircase with hurried strides. Stone followed to the landing.

"I bought the lot," he heard the dealer say. "You said everything in your apartment was there."

"Sure," said the man, confidently; "so it was."

"There was a rug," said the dealer, insistently. "Where's the little rug? We ain't had that."

"Oh, that?" answered the other. "I sold that. That wasn't there when you bought the lot." Stone heard the dealer's voice suddenly become strained and vehement.

"What was his name?" asked he.

"Vereker," said Stone, breaking in. "I was with him when he bought it, although," he continued, "I don't believe it's any use, I don't believe he wants to sell it."

The dealer took the vague address, "somewhere in Twelfth street, I think," and giving the carter final instructions made a final and a hurried exit.

"Well," thought Stone, a little disappointed, "it was the rug, after all." He felt sorry that the potential mystery of the two hundred dollars had been so easily solved.

Next morning, however, as at breakfast he scanned his first morning paper he uttered a quick exclamation, and the words "Mysterious Murder of a Gifted Artist—Robert J. Vereker Killed!" caught his eye. There was not concretely in his mind at the time any connection between the deed and the attraction of the dealer for the rug, but that strange sixth sense that told him the case contained some mystery, some element of adventure came strongly to him. He felt again that he was upon the verge of action and adventure such as his spirit craved.

### Mysterious Death of the Artist.

Hastily despatching his breakfast he was soon upon his way to the flat of his late acquaintance, the direc-

the morning paper had been specific. On his journey he carried the details in his mind—in the manner in which the maid, coming as usual to "clean out," had found an unexpected impediment in the centre of the studio, its dead tenant, Vereker, lying flat upon the ground, with the purple marks of fingers on his rigid throat, his form stiffened in death. His rings were yet upon his fingers. Fifty dollars in bills was in his pocketbook. Everything in the studio remained undisturbed.

It was this want of plunder as the reason for the crime that made it in a measure more puzzling, for Vereker had been a man of placid life and no feminine



attachments, which have in them the germs of such tragedies. Stone's mind, however, verged after all his reflections but to one thing—the rug. Was there a connection between the eagerness of the dealer in his quest for it and the tragedy of the dead artist? Was it possible that the artist's obstinacy of possession had sealed his doom; that the other's fierce desire of possession had overmastered him? If so—

Stone's train of useless speculation came to an end with his entrance to the house. He was known there as the friend of Vereker and immediately admitted by the voluble janitor.

As for the body, it lay in the little bedroom white and cold, and the janitor shrugged lugubriously as he whispered confidentially of the presence of two gentlemen in the casket line who were fulfilling some of the introductory parts of their lugubrious tasks.

Stone went straight to the studio accompanied by the janitor, delighted at the chance to talk. Under the top lights all was as if it had been a month ago—yesterday, before the thing had happened. A half finished oil sketch stood upon the top of the bookcase. The writing table had upon it some memoranda borne down by their familiar paper weight.

Stone, however, had only what might be called a subconscious impression of these things. Quickly he looked about the place, answering mechanically the janitor's outflow and alert but for one thing, the rug. It was not upon the floor. He opened a closet at a side. It was not there. The janitor looked wonderingly at his investigations as Stone proceeded to a smaller room at the side and closely regarded it.

"Did you leave something here? Did Mr.—did he?" (he jerked a thumb in the direction of the room where the professional activities were getting exercised) "have something you'd loaned him?" he commenced.

"A little rug," Stone said. "A square little rug. Have you seen it?"

"Sure," said the janitor. "He brought it home last night. He had it under his arm when he came in and I joshed him about it. Showed it to me. Isn't it here?"

He seemed to awaken to the possibility of mystery. "By George, that's right!" said he. "I don't believe it is. That's strange, now, I'd forgotten that rug."

There was but one more room at which to look and this was presently opened. A genial, rubicund face appeared and a body with a pretence to dark formality of clothes.

"Well, that's all over," he remarked inconsequently to the two as he was joined by his companion. "Strange case though, wasn't it? I've handled many of 'em, but you don't come across that kind every day. Want to have a look at him?"

He opened the door hospitably and Stone and his companion entered. Vereker lay placid enough upon the bed, though Stone's look did not dwell upon him, for with all his pulse for action and thrilling deeds he had a strange awe and mystery for the random clockwork of the human machine. So he looked hurriedly for the rug, but there was no rug, neither on table nor floor nor chair. The rug was the one thing missing; the inconsequential, though sufficiently curious rug was the one thing missing.

The adventure hunter thought of these things as he went away. Of one thing, however, he was sure. The murder had obviously been done for the rug. The dealer, or the ostensible dealer, had evidently done the murder, but, puzzle at the question as Stone would, he could get no suggestion of its peculiar value as the balance for the brutal crime. It might have been that in the heat of altercation the dealer had

been murdered before now on the value of the trinket. It may have been this. But even as Stone so reflected there came back to him the fire in the dealer's eager eyes, the fierce impetuosity of his questioning of "Jim," the eager hurry on his way in the direction of Vereker's.

From "Jim" himself, who was easily discoverable, Stone could get no information. He had been hired to cart some stuff away, which the man was going to buy. That was all he knew. He had taken it to such and such an address. Stone went to this, too, but with little hope of a clue. The general negotiation for the furniture of the shabby man had obviously been made

given up hope of coming at any solution of the puzzle. It was the one mystery in the long line of them which had left him metaphorically both stranded and dry.

And then, one morning, when he had definitely given up all hope of seeing the rug or of hearing anything concerning it again, he found himself at the wharf of an ocean liner, engaged upon the business of one of those social, necessary "au revoirs" with which we burden departing friends to Europe, and, being early and waiting, found himself staring down at a familiar and eccentric object, squeezed among petticoats and shawls and all the impedimenta of an Italian bound emigrant's luggage. It was the prayer rug, arrived at a further stage of checkered possession. And over the bundle—its clear possessor—sat a thick, sturdy, dark eyed, olive hued shawled woman, patiently munching some bread and some onion.

"Going back to Italy?" Stone saluted her.

The woman looked distrustfully for a moment, but Stone's frank face decided her to gentility.

"Yes," said she. "Go back—go back to Eetall—go

back for two, three month. Go back for better time."

"That's fine," replied Stone, gaining assurance with the warmth of his reception. "And—er, what's that you've got there? That's a rug, isn't it?"

The woman interrupted communicatively. "Ynaas," said she. "That's a rug. My man peeked that a rug up. My man work on a railroad. He peek dat up—peek dat up by the train. Yes; that a rug."

"Twenty dollars," said Stone definitively. The woman smiled, showing her strong teeth, and proceeded to unlodge the rope that compressed her belongings. She smiled more broadly when the yellow bill was pressed into her hand. Stone rolled up the delicate, tiny object, but even as he did so he became aware of an eager glance which was directed to him. Without appearing to notice it, he took an unnoticed survey of the man whose attention he had drawn. He was dark and shabby, sinister and furtive. Stone stood talking to the woman, and still keeping the man in unobtrusive regard, walked nonchalantly about waiting for his friends, and when they finally appeared he, pleading business, bade them a brief "Goodby."

Then, walking slowly through the streets to his home, he gave his pursuer (for his instinct told him that once again the relentless pursuit of the rug had recommenced) every chance.

The man followed doggedly on the other side twenty paces behind, taking advantage of every cover in the shape of groups of walkers in the street. Several times Stone stopped to enjoy the grim humor of the man's wait, which he saw reflected in the windows in which he looked. And there was the fellow, unobtrusive but deliberate, patient but with a dogged tenacity of purpose written upon his face.

So Stone arrived at his hotel and saw the fellow waiting still, seated on the stone step of a vacant house at some distance up the street.

But Stone had on this occasion no idea of waiting at home. He had a plan in view which he could better put into operation in the brown stone house of Leveritt, his friend. He levied upon that house through the telephone.

"Will you let me invite myself?" he inquired, after ringing up the number. "Just for this evening, I think, though possibly for a week."

The voice at the other end of the wire betrayed no surprise. Stone's friends had no surprises—when it came to Stone. So Stone walked forth with his rug again, even obtrusively displayed, and again his friend of the furtive face and the shabby clothes followed, and at Stone's entrance to the house of his friend waited still.

It was dusk when Stone arrived and in a few words explained to his friend the disposition he, the adventure hunter, wished to make of that friend's house. The friend nodded agreeably. He was not an adventure hunter, but had lay sympathies. So Stone and he sat up that night, the prayer rug out-

Problem of the Rug.

Valentine Stone assimilated these details with conflicting feelings—those of pleasure that his premonitions of mystery were once more proven to be right; those of perplexity that the solution of the problem was as distant as ever. The rug was now beginning to shape in his mind in strange and fanciful ways. It was obvious now that the murder of Vereker had been accomplished for the rug alone and that the crime was no result of passion. Yet what could the rug's mysterious value be? Why should this small square, worth possibly \$200 at the outside value, be so greatly a thing of tragedy and blood, taking its possessor even as he touched it? Who had come by it, and how?

It was seldom that any mystery which the Adventure Hunter had determined to solve left him utterly without theories for solution, but the mystery of the Persian rug was one that threatened to do so. For once Stone was thoroughly at a loss. He made inquiry of every dealer of prominence in the country, but no trace or suggestion concerning it could he get.

So it was that, three months after the tragedy in

spread upon the table of the second floor front room, which was the library, till the clock struck ten, at which time Stone sent his obedient friend on.

Left alone Stone turned up the blinds and lit a cigar. He took a book and disposed himself to read. Outside the night was calm, and as time went on the sounds of man and his traffic became more fragmentary. As the clock struck the half-past midnight there was little stir. Then Stone stretched himself, yawned, looked at his watch, carefully pulled the blinds down, turned off the electric and, leaving the rug upon its place on the table, proceeded up stairs to the room directly above.

The room, however, he did not light. He only peeped through the edges of the blind. Then he chuckled, for what he had expected to see he saw, and the sight was pleasant to him.

Capturing the Men.

Almost opposite to the house in which he waited was an uncompleted skyscraper, its gaunt steel skeleton structure rising silhouetted clearly against the white moon. But it was not this for which he looked. This was but the setting. It was at the fifth and progressing story that he peered and at which he smiled grimly. It was the figure of a man, of two men, outlined against the transparent sky. They stood motionless for ten minutes, for twenty. The clock struck half past one before they moved from their vigil. Then they disappeared cautiously into the shadow of the lower stories.

Stone sat smiling still, clicking his watch, his habit of showing particular pleasure. Then he sat silent, listening with a striking and silent intensity. The night by this time was very still. Only some slight and distant sound came occasionally and seemed to emphasize the brooding silence. Then came a slight, slight movement downstairs. Removing his boots he noiselessly moved toward his friend's room, the door of which was open. Leveritt was waiting, warned, alert, in the dark. Stone pressed his arm and they moved soundlessly down the thickly carpeted staircase and waited without a word outside the room below.

"Oh, Bill, how easy!" laughed one fellow in the room in an undertone. He had turned on one small electric lamp and half sat on the table, negligently swinging his leg.

Valentine Stone carefully covered each man and signed to Leveritt, who touched a button. The lights flashed up.

"Up!" rasped Stone.

The four hands of the intruders were raised.

"Yes, easier really than I wished," said the adventure hunter. "Still in the rug business, Mr. Dealer?"

The gaunter, darker man of the two quailed. Then the necessities of his position came home to him.

"The 'em up, Leveritt," said Stone, "and lead 'em out in the hall. I'll telephone." Leveritt bound one fellow with a handkerchief, moving toward the door. The other, still with his hands up, followed slowly. Near the entrance he waited, his back near the side to the door. He seemed to lean for a moment and then—the lights were out. He had pressed the switch. Like a shot he ducked and was upon Stone, wrenching the weapon from the adventure hunter's hand, and a fruitless report rang out. Leveritt had pinioned the other fellow, his job of manning uncompleted. In the dark Stone clinched with the man, only hoping to crowd him and get the arm which held the weapon.

He gained a hold of one arm, he knew not which. He did not know what moment another shot would ring out, this time definitely ending things. He twisted with all his strength, engaged upon that subtlety of jiu-jitsu known as the "come along." Then came the sharp sound of a crack, a groan and the dull sound of a weapon falling to the floor. He had chosen the right arm from the jostling of the dark.

But the lights suddenly flashed on again, turned up by Leveritt, and the fellow rose from the floor, upon which he had fallen. As he did so a small pocketbook almost unnoticed in the struggle fell to the floor. Stone instantly possessed himself of it.

"Curious, eh?" sneered the fellow. Stone opened the book mechanically and his eyes fell upon a newspaper clipping gummed to one of the leaves.

"Yes, that's it," said he. "You've got it. It wouldn't have happened if he would have parted with that accursed rug."

Stone swiftly scanned the clipping.

"How did you come by it?" he asked, "and how did you know it when you saw it?"

"Well, I picked it up," said the man, "if you want to know so much. I picked it up on the very day I read that clipping in the paper. Coincidence? Well, more of 'em happen in life than you think of. Then I found out its secret. You can find most secrets if you go after 'em. I found it after some one else had it, too—but he's dead now. Well, it happened at a time that I was moving, and I lost track of it before I'd written down what it was. I suppose the delivery man had a wife who liked such things. Then I traced it to that fellow that sold it that day. It took me six months. It had changed hands several times. He has the trick of that!"

He was interrupted by the entrance of the detective. But Stone scarcely noticed the other than by indicating the prisoners with his hand.

The detectives looked surprised. "Who are they, Mr. Stone?" asked he.

"The man who killed Vereker and a friend of his," answered Stone, "but wait a bit, Lieutenant. Just listen to this."

He commenced to read, while the policeman regarded him blankly.

"Great interest attaches in a peculiar way to the recent discoveries of ancient coins and jewels which came to light through Professor Jewett's excavation in Arabia on the site of several ancient Assyrian cities. It brings to mind a legend still possessed by an Arabian tribe, which has come down through countless generations, that there exists an almost incalculable hidden treasure in some ancient Assyrian city long since gone to ruin and covered by desert sands. The story has it that the secret was written on a rug which is supposed to exist somewhere in the world, but of which track has been lost for hundreds of years."

"Say, Mr. Stone," said the lieutenant genially, "what's got you? What in the hell are you talking about? I guess it's some josh, isn't it?"

Stone indicated the prayer rug lying on the table.

"You see that?" asked he.

"That little square of carpet?" inquired the policeman.

"Well, I picked that up for \$20 yesterday," replied the adventure hunter. "It was a bargain."

The policeman stroked his blue jawl in a puzzled way.

"Well, I'm damned if I see the point," said he, "tell me that again some other time. I'd better take the prisoners to the station now. You're a great detective, but I'll be hanged if I can see your joke. Good day, sir."

Stone and he sat up that night, the prayer rug out-

five o'clock

Bert had had soda

the last

low e