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including **BLACK MASK MAGAZINE**

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AUTHOR: **JOHN BUCHAN**

TITLE: ***Sing a Song of Sixpence***

TYPE: Suspense and Crime

LOCALE: London

COMMENTS: *Robert Louis Stevenson proved that London could be a Western Baghdad, a true City of the Caliphs. John Buchan, author of the classic,* THE THIRTY-NINE STEPS, *gives us an even newer Arabian Nights' Entertainment — again in the heart of London.*

EDWARD LEITHEN'S FACE HAD THAT sharp chiseling of the jaw and that compression of the lips which seem to follow upon high legal success. Also an overdose of German gas in '18 had given his skin an habitual pallor, so that he looked not unhealthy, but notably urban. As a matter of fact, he was one of the hardest men I have ever known, but a chance observer might have guessed from his complexion that he rarely left the pavements.

Burminster, who had come back from a month in the grass countries with a face like a deep-sea mariner's, commented on this one evening.

"How do you manage always to look the complete Cit, Ned?" he asked. "You're as much a Londoner as a Parisian is a Parisian, you know."

Leithen said that he was not ashamed of it, and he embarked on a eulogy of the metropolis. In London you met sooner or later everybody you had ever known; you could lay your hand on any knowledge you wanted; you could pull strings that controlled the innermost Sahara and the topmost Pamirs. Romance lay in wait for you at every street corner. It was the true City of the Caliphs.

"That is what they say," said Sandy Arbuthnot sadly, "but I never found it so. I yawn my head off in London. Nothing amusing ever finds me out — I have to go and search for it, and it usually costs the deuce of a lot."

"I once stumbled upon a pretty generous allowance of romance," said Leithen, "and it cost me precisely sixpence." Then he told us this story. . . .

It happened long ago, just when I was beginning to get on at the Bar. I spent busy days in court and chambers, but I was young and had a young man's appetite for society; so I used to dine out most nights and go to more balls than were good for me. It was pleasant after a heavy day to dive into a different kind of life. My rooms at the time were in Down Street, the same house as my present one, only two floors higher up.

On a certain night in February, I was dining in Bryanston Square with the Nantleys. Mollie Nantley was an old friend, and used to fit me as an unattached bachelor into her big dinners. She was a young hostess and full of ambition, and one met an odd assortment of people at her house. Mostly political, of course, but a sprinkling of art and letters, and any visiting lion that happened to be passing through. Mollie was a very innocent lion-hunter, but she had a partiality for the breed.

I don't remember much about the dinner, except that the principal guest had failed her. Mollie was loud in her lamentations. He was a South American President who had engineered a very pretty *coup d'état* the year before, and was now in England on some business concerning the finances of his country. You may remember his name — Ramon Pelem — he made rather a stir in the world for a year or two. I had read about him in the papers, and had looked forward to meeting him, for he had won his way to power by extraordinary boldness and courage, and he was quite young. There was a story that he was partly English and that his grandfather's name had been Pelham. I don't know what truth there was in that, but he knew England well, and Englishmen liked him.

Well, he had cried off on the telephone an hour before, and Mollie was grievously disappointed. Her other guests bore the loss with more fortitude, for I expect they thought he was a brand of cigar.

In those days dinners began earlier and dances later than they do today. I meant to leave soon, go back to my rooms, read briefs, and then look in at Lady Samplar's dance between 11 and 12. So at 9:30 I took my leave.

Jervis, the old butler, who had been my ally from boyhood, was standing on the threshold, and in the square there was a considerable crowd, now thinning away. I asked what the trouble was.

"There's been an arrest, Mr. Edward," he said in an awestruck voice. "It 'appened when I was serving coffee in the dining-room, but our Albert saw it all. Two foreigners, he said — proper rascals by their look — were took away by the police just outside this very door. The constables was very nippy and collared them before they could use their pistols — but they 'ad pistols on them."

"Did they propose to burgle you?" I asked.

"I cannot say, Mr. Edward. But I shall give instructions for a very careful locking up tonight."

There were no cabs about, so I decided to walk on and pick one up. When I got into Great Cumberland Place, it began to rain sharply, and I was just about to call a prowling cab, when I put my hand into my pocket. I found that I had no more than one solitary sixpence.

I could, of course, have paid when I got to my flat. But as the rain seemed to be slacking off, I preferred to walk. Mollie's dining-room had been stuffy, I had been in court all day, and I wanted some fresh air.

You know how in little things, when you have decided on a course, you are curiously reluctant to change it. Before I got to the Marble Arch, it had begun to pour in downright earnest. But I still stumped on. Only I entered the Park, for even in February there is a certain amount of cover from the trees.

I passed one or two hurrying pedestrians, but the place was almost empty. The occasional lamps made only spots of light in a dripping darkness, and it struck me that this was a curious patch of gloom and loneliness to be so near to crowded streets, for with the rain had come a fine mist. I pitied the poor devils to whom it was the only home. There was one of them on a seat which I passed. The collar of his thin, shabby overcoat was turned up, and his shameful old felt hat was turned down, so that only a few square inches of pale face were visible. His toes stuck out of his boots, and he seemed sunk in a sodden misery.

I passed him and then turned back. Casual charity is an easy dope for the conscience, and I indulge in it too often. When I approached him again, he seemed to stiffen and his hands moved in his pockets.

"A rotten night," I said. "Is sixpence any good to you?" And I held out my solitary coin.

He lifted his face, and I started. For the eyes that looked at me were not those of a waster. They were bright, penetrating, authoritative — and they were young. I was conscious that they took in more of me than mine did of him.

"Thank you very much," he said, as he took the coin, and the voice was that of a cultivated man. "But I'm afraid I need rather more than sixpence."

"How much?" I asked. This was clearly an original.

"To be accurate, five million pounds."

He was certainly mad, but I was fascinated by this wisp of humanity. I wished that he would show more of his face.

"Till your ship comes home," I said, "you want a bed, and you'd be the better for a change. Sixpence is all I have on me. But if you come to my rooms, I'll give you the price of a night's lodging, and I think I might find you some old clothes."

"Where do you live?" he asked.

"Close by — in Down Street." I gave the number.

He seemed to reflect, and then he shot a glance on either side into the

gloom behind the road. It may have been fancy, but I thought that I saw something stir in the darkness.

"What are you?" he asked.

I was getting abominably wet, and yet I submitted to a cross-examination by this waif.

"I am a lawyer," I said.

He looked at me again.

"Have you a telephone?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Right," he said. "You seem a good fellow and I'll take you at your word. I'll follow you. . . . Don't look back, please. It's important. . . . I'll be in Down Street as soon as you. . . . *Marchons.*"

It sounds preposterous, but I did exactly as I was bid. I never looked back, but I kept my ears open for the sound of following footsteps. I thought I heard them, and then they seemed to die away. I turned out of the Park at Grosvenor Gate and went down Park Lane. When I reached the house which contained my flat, I looked up and down the street, but it was empty except for a waiting cab. But just as I turned in, I caught a glimpse of someone running at the Hertford Street end. The runner came to a sudden halt, and I saw that it was not the man I had left.

To my surprise I found the waif on the landing outside my flat. I was about to tell him to stop outside, but as soon as I unlocked the door he brushed past me and entered. My man, who did not sleep on the premises, had left the light burning in the little hall.

"Lock the door," he said in a tone of authority. "Forgive me taking charge, but I assure you it is important."

Then to my amazement he peeled off his sopping overcoat and kicked off his disreputable shoes. They were odd shoes, for what looked like his toes sticking out was really part of the makeup. He stood up before me in underclothes and socks, and I noticed that his underclothing seemed to be of the finest material.

"Now for your telephone," he said.

I was getting angry at these liberties.

"Who the devil are you?" I demanded.

"I am President Pelem," he said, with all the dignity in the world. "And you?"

"I? — oh, I'm the Shah of Persia."

He laughed. "You know you invited me here," he said. "You've brought this on yourself." Then he stared at me. "Hullo, I've seen you before. You're Leithen. I saw you play at Lords'. I was twelfth man for Harrow that year. . . . Now for the telephone."

There was something about the fellow, something defiant and debonair and young, that stopped all further protest on my part. He might or might not be President Pelem, but he was certainly not a wastrel. Besides, he seemed curiously keyed up, as if the occasion were desperately important, and he infected me with the same feeling. I said no more, but led the way into my sitting-room. He

flung himself on the telephone, gave a number, was instantly connected, and began a conversation in monosyllables.

It was a queer jumble that I overheard. Bryanston Square was mentioned, and the Park, and the number of my house was given — to somebody. There was a string of foreign names — Pedro and Alejandro and Manuel and Alcaza — and short breathless inquiries. Then I heard — "a good fellow — looks as if he might be useful in a row," and I wondered if he was referring to me. Some rapid Spanish followed, and then, "Come round at once — they will be here before you. Have policemen below, but don't let them come up. We should be able to manage alone. Oh, and tell Burton to ring up here as soon as he has news." And he gave my telephone number.

I put some coals on the fire, changed into a tweed jacket, and lit a pipe. I fetched a dressing-gown from my bedroom and flung it on the sofa. "You'd better put that on," I said when he had finished.

He shook his head.

"I would rather be unencumbered," he said. "But I should dearly love a cigarette . . . and a liqueur brandy, if you have such a thing. That Park of yours is infernally chilly."

I supplied his needs, and he stretched himself in an armchair, with his stockinged feet to the fire.

"You have been very good-humored, Leithen," he said. "Valdez — that's my aide-de-camp — will be here presently, and he will probably be preceded by other guests. But I think I have time for the short explanation which is your due. You believed what I told you?"

I nodded.

"Good. Well, I came to London three weeks ago to raise a loan. That was a matter of life or death for my big stupid country. I have succeeded. This afternoon the agreement was signed. I think I mentioned the amount to you — five million sterling."

He smiled happily and blew a smoke ring into the air.

"I must tell you that I have enemies. Among my happy people there are many rascals, and I had to deal harshly with them. 'So foul a sky clears not without a storm' — that's Shakespeare, isn't it? I learned it at school. You see, I had Holy Church behind me, and therefore I had against me all the gentry who call themselves liberators. A good many are now reposing beneath the sod, but some of the worst remain. In particular, six followed me to England with instructions that I must not return.

"I don't mind telling you, Leithen, that I have had a peculiarly rotten time the last three weeks. It was most important that nothing should happen to me till the loan was settled, so I had to lead the sheltered life. It went against the grain, I assure you, for I prefer the offensive to the defensive. The English police were very amiable, and I never stirred without

a cordon — your people and my own. The Six wanted to kill me, and as it is pretty easy to kill anybody if you don't mind being killed yourself, we had to take rather elaborate precautions. As it was, I was twice nearly done in. Once my carriage broke down mysteriously, and a crowd collected, and if I hadn't had the luck to board a passing cab, I should have had a knife in my ribs. The second was at a public dinner — something not quite right about the sauce served with the oysters. One of my staff is still seriously ill."

He stretched his arms.

"Well, that first stage is over. They can't wreck the loan, whatever happens to me. Now I am free to adopt different tactics and take the offensive. I have no fear of the Six in my own country. There I can take precautions, and they will find it difficult to cross the frontier or to live for six hours thereafter if they succeed. But here you are a free people, and protection is not so easy. I do not wish to leave England just yet — I have done my work and have earned a little play. I know your land and love it, and I look forward to seeing some of my friends. Also I want to attend the Grand National. Therefore, it is necessary that my enemies should be confined for a little, while I take my holiday. So for this evening I made a plan. I took the offensive. I deliberately put myself in danger."

He turned his dancing eyes toward me, and I have rarely had such an impression of wild audacity.

"We have an excellent intelligence system," he went on, "and the Six have been assiduously shadowed. But as I have told you, no precautions avail against the fanatic, and I do not wish to be killed on my little holiday. So I resolved to draw their fire — to expose myself as ground bait, so to speak, that I might have the chance of netting them. The Six usually hunt in couples, so it was necessary to have three separate acts in the play, if all were to be gathered in. The first —"

"Was in Bryanston Square," I put in, "outside Lady Nantley's house?"

"True. How did you know?"

"I have just been dining there, and heard that you were expected. I saw the crowd in the square as I left."

"It seems to have gone off quite nicely. We took pains to let it be known where I was dining. The Six, who mistrust me, delegated only two of their number for the job. They never put all their eggs in one basket. The two gentlemen were induced to make a scene, and, since they proved to be heavily armed, were taken into custody and may get a six months' sentence. Very prettily managed, but unfortunately, it was the two that matter least — the ones we call Little Pedro and Alejandro the Scholar. Impatient, blundering children, both of them. That leaves four."

The telephone bell rang, and he made a long arm for the receiver. The news he got seemed to be good, for he turned a smiling face to me.

"I should have said two. My little

enterprise in the Park has proved a brilliant success. . . . But I must explain. I was to be the bait for my enemies, so I showed myself to the remaining four. That was really a rather clever piece of business. They lost me at the Marble Arch and they did not recognize me as the scarecrow sitting on the seat in the rain. But they knew I had gone to earth there, and they stuck to the scent like terriers. Presently they would have found me, and there would have been shooting. Some of my own people were in the shadow between the road and the railings."

"When I saw you, were your enemies near?" I asked.

"Two were on the opposite side of the road. One was standing under the lamp-post at the gate. I don't know where the fourth was at that moment. But all had passed me more than once. . . . By the way, you very nearly got yourself shot, you know."

"Why did you leave the Park if you had your trap so well laid?" I asked.

"Because it meant dealing with all four at once, and I do them the honor of being rather nervous about them. They are very quick with their guns. I wanted a chance to break up the covey, and your arrival gave it me. When I went off, two followed, as I thought they would. My car was in Park Lane, and gave me a lift; and one of them saw me in it. I puzzled them a little, but by now they must be certain. You see, my car has been waiting for some minutes outside this house."

"What about the other two?" I asked.

"Burton has just telephoned that they have been gathered in. Quite an exciting little scrap. To your police it must have seemed a bad case of highway robbery — two ruffianly looking fellows hold up a peaceful elderly gentleman returning from dinner. The odds were not quite like that, but the men I had on the job are old soldiers and can move softly. . . . I only wish I knew which two they have got. Burton was not sure. Alcaza is one, but I can't be certain about the other. I hope it is not the Irishman."

My bell rang very loud and steadily.

"In a few seconds I shall have solved that problem," he said gaily. "I am afraid I must trouble you to open the door, Leithen."

"Is it your aide-de-camp?"

"No. I instructed Valdez to knock. It is the residuum of the Six. Now, listen to me, my friend. These two have come here to kill me, and I don't mean to be killed. My first plan was to have Valdez here — and others — so that my two enemies should walk into a trap. But I changed my mind before I telephoned. They are very clever men and by this time they will be very wary. So I have thought of something else."

The bell rang again and then a third time insistently.

"Take these," and he held out a pair of cruel little bluish revolvers. "When you open the door, you will say that the President is at home and,

in token of his confidence, offers them these. '*Une espèce d'Irlandais, Messieurs. Vous commencez trop tard, et vous finissez trop tôt.*' Then bring them here. Quick. I hope Corbally is one of them."

I did exactly as I was told. I cannot say that I had any liking for the task, but I was a good deal under the spell of that calm young man, and I was resigned to my flat being made a rendezvous for desperadoes. I had locked and chained and bolted the door, so it took me a few moments to open it.

I found myself looking at emptiness.

"Who is it?" I called. "Who rang?"

I was answered from behind me. It was the quickest thing I have ever seen, for they must have slipped through in the moment when my eyes were dazzled by the change from the dim light of the hall to the glare of the landing. That gave me some notion of the men we had to deal with.

"Here," said the voice. I turned and saw two men in waterproofs and felt hats, who kept their hands in their pockets and had a fraction of an eye on the two pistols I swung by the muzzles.

"M. le Président will be glad to see you, gentlemen," I said. I held out the revolvers, which they seemed to grasp and flick into their pockets with a single movement. Then I repeated slowly the piece of rudeness in French.

One of the men laughed. "Ramon does not forget," he said. He was a young man with sandy hair and hot, blue eyes and an odd break in his long drooping nose. The other was a wiry little fellow, with a grizzled beard and what looked like a stiff leg.

I had no guess at my friend's plan, and was concerned to do precisely as I was told. I opened the door of my sitting-room and noticed that the President was stretched on my sofa, facing the door. He was smoking and was still in his underclothes. When the two men behind me saw that he was patently unarmed, they slipped into the room with quick catlike movements and took their stand with their backs against the door.

"Hullo, Corbally," said the President pleasantly. "And you, Manuel. You're looking younger than when I saw you last. Have a cigarette?" and he nodded toward my box on the table behind him. Both shook their heads.

"I'm glad you have come. You have probably seen the news of the loan in the evening papers. That should give you a holiday, as it gives me one. No further need for the hectic oversight of each other, which is so wearing and takes up so much time."

"No," said the man called Manuel, and there was something very grim about his quiet tones. "We shall take steps to prevent any need for that in the future."

"Tut, tut, Manuel. You are too fond of melodrama to be an artist. You are a priest at heart."

The man snarled. "There will be no priest at your death-bed." Then to his companion, "Let us get this farce over."

The President paid not the slightest attention, but looked steadily at the Irishman. "You used to be a sportsman, Mike. Have you come to share Manuel's taste for potting the sitting rabbit?"

"We are not sportsmen; we are executioners of justice," said Manuel.

The President laughed merrily. "Superb! The best Roman manner." He still kept his eyes on Corbally.

"Damn you, what's your game, Ramon?" the Irishman asked. His freckled face had become very red.

"Simply to propose a short armistice. I want a holiday. If you must know, I want to go to the Grand National."

"So do I."

"Well, let's call a truce. Say for two months or till I leave England — whichever period shall be the shorter. After that you can get busy again."

The one he had named Manuel broke into a spluttering torrent of Spanish, and for a little they all talked that language. I had never seen this class of ruffian before, to whom murder was as simple as shooting a partridge, and I noted curiously the lean hands, the restless, wary eyes, and the ugly lips of the type. So far as I could make out, the President seemed to be getting on well with the Irishman, but to be having trouble with Manuel.

"Have ye really and truly nothing on ye?" Corbally asked.

The President stretched his arms and revealed his slim figure in its close-fitting pants and vest.

"Nor him there?" and he nodded toward me.

"He is a lawyer; he doesn't use guns."

"Then I'm damned if I touch ye. Two months it is. What's your fancy for Liverpool?"

This was too much for Manuel. I saw in what seemed to be one movement his hand slip from his pocket, Corbally's arm swing in a circle, and a plaster bust of Julius Caesar tumbled off the top of my bookcase. Then I heard the report.

"Ye nasty little man," said Corbally as he pressed him to his bosom in a bear's hug.

"You are a traitor!" Manuel shouted. "How will we face the others? What will Alejandro say and Alcaza —?"

"I think I can explain," said the President pleasantly. "They won't know for quite a time, and then only if you tell them. You two gentlemen are all that remain for the moment of your patriotic company. The other four have been the victims of the English police — two in Bryanston Square, and two in the Park close to the Marble Arch."

"Ye don't say!" said Corbally, with admiration in his voice. "Faith, that's smart work!"

"They, too, will have a little holiday. A few months to meditate on politics, while you and I go to the Grand National."

Suddenly there was a sharp rat-tat at my door. It was like the knocking in *Macbeth* for dramatic effect. Cor-

bally had one pistol at my ear in an instant, while a second covered the President.

"It's all right," said the latter, never moving a muscle. "It's General Valdez, whom I think you know. That was another argument which I was coming to if I hadn't had the good fortune to appeal to Mr. Corbally's higher nature. I know you have sworn to kill me, but I take it that the killer wants to have a sporting chance of escape. Well, there wouldn't have been the faintest shadow of a chance here. Valdez is at the door, and the English police are below. You are brave men, I know, but even brave men dislike the cold gallows." The knocker fell again. "Let him in, Leithen," I was told, "or he will be damaging your valuable door."

A tall man in an ulster, which looked as if it covered a uniform, stood on the threshold. "President Pelem," he began . . .

"The President is here," I said. "Quite well and in great form. He is entertaining two other guests."

The General marched to my sitting-room. I was behind him and did not see his face, but I can believe that it showed surprise when he recognized the guests.

"I think you know each other," said the President graciously.

"My God!" Valdez seemed to choke at the sight. "These swine! . . . Excellency, I have —"

"You have nothing of the kind. These are friends of mine for the next two months, and Mr. Corbally and I are going to the Grand National together. Will you have the goodness to conduct them downstairs and explain to the inspector of the police below that all has gone well and that I am perfectly satisfied, and that he will hear from me in the morning. . . . One moment. What about a stirrup cup? Leithen, does your establishment run to a whiskey-and-soda?"

It did. We all had a drink, and I believe I clinked glasses with Manuel.

I looked in at Lady Samplar's dance as I had meant to. Presently I saw a resplendent figure arrive — the President, with the ribbon of the Gold Star of Bolivar across his chest. He was no more the larky undergraduate, but the responsible statesman, the father of his country. There was a considerable crowd in his vicinity when I got near him and he was making his apologies to Mollie Nantley. She saw me and insisted on introducing me. "I so much wanted you two to meet. I had hoped it would be at my dinner — but anyhow I have managed it." I think she was a little surprised when the President took my hand in both of his. "I saw Mr. Leithen play at Lords'," he said. "I was twelfth man for Harrow that year. It is delightful to make his acquaintance; I shall never forget this meeting."

They got him next year. They were bound to, for in that kind of business you can have no sure protection. But he managed to set his country on its feet before he went down. . . . No, it was neither Manuel nor Corbally. I think it was Alejandro the Scholar.