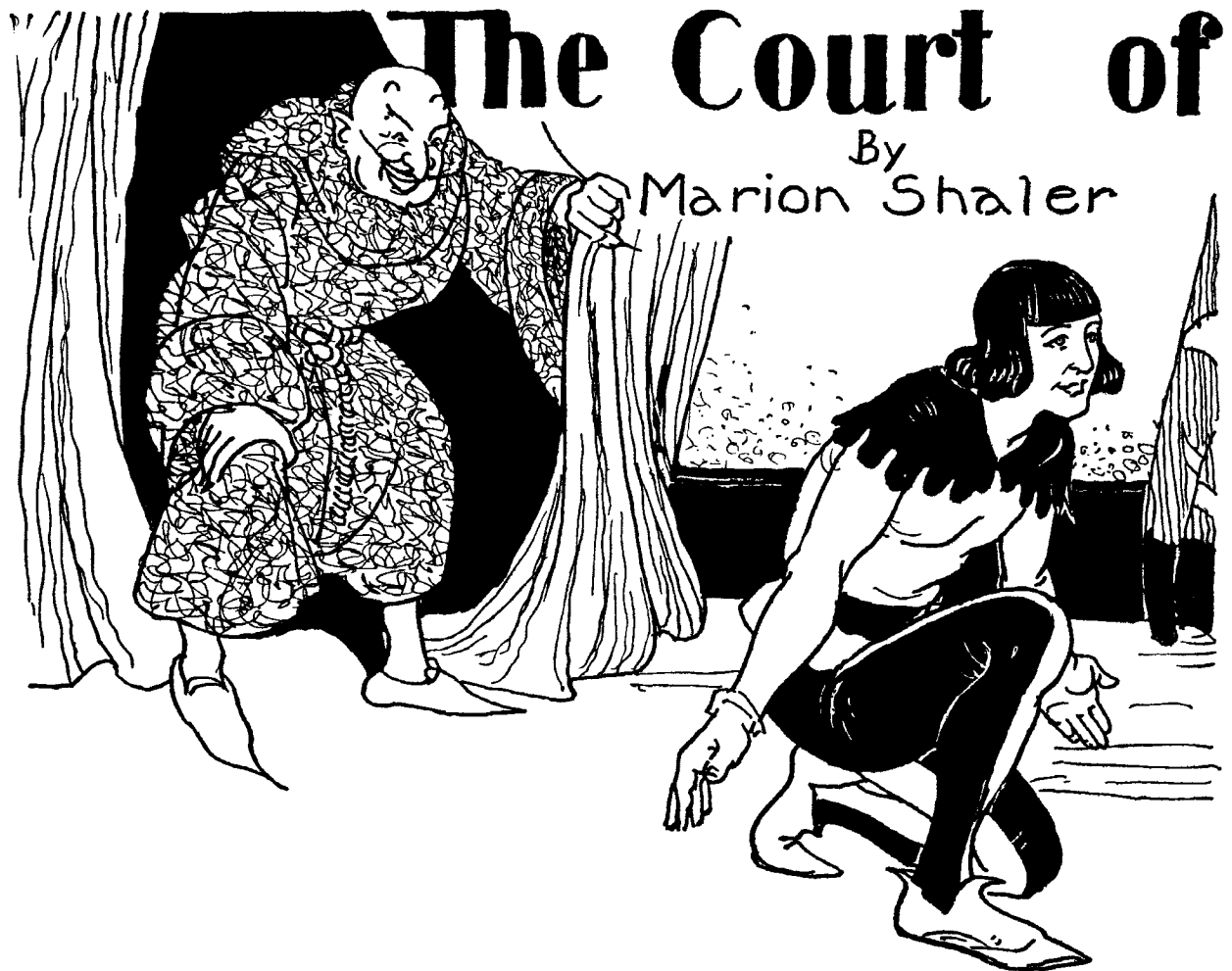


Court of the Wicked Queen

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DAME YOLANDE was unhappy because Lord Raoul de Trentanaye, her son, was showing symptoms of the old restlessness of the young. She held his tutor in conference in the hedged gardens of the chateau.

"Why is he not as he used to be, Monsieur duVal?"

"Madame and my liege, he is nineteen."

But to Dame Yolande that was no reason why he should be changed—sad and then satiric and always restless, restless. "You do not press him too much at his work?"

"Madame, no. And up till now he needed no pressing. He was eager and avid for learning. Now—it seems all indifferent to him."

"Have you not noticed—does he not sometimes—lack in respect for sacred things?"

"He asked—pardon, madame—if I supposed God were in love with the Virgin Mary, and where Joseph would come in in Heaven in that

case."

Dame Yolande betrayed no emotion except in the slight movement of her eyebrows as she said, "Lord Raoul loves his jest."

"No, madame, I do not think he was jesting. He is intensely awake to humanity, and even in sacred things it is only the human aspect that interests him."

How much justice Dame Yolande saw in the explanation was not easy to perceive, but she was not to be contradicted.

"Lord Raoul loves his jest," she repeated.

"Yes, madame," said Monsieur du Val, learning his lesson.

His submission softened his lady. "Monsieur du Val, I cannot endure it to see Raoul sitting silent, abstracted, looking off at nothing, and thinking—of something. What does he think of?"

"Madame, how can I tell? Unless it is of adventure or—"

the Wicked Queen



“Yes, M. du Val?”

“Or love—”

Dame Yolande frowned. “Is he not satisfied with the Lady Fleur, who will make him an excellent wife?”

“Perhaps it is of her he thinks—”

But the lady’s response was unhesitant. “No, oh, no.”

“Oh, if madame says it is not.” The subtle M. du Val!

Dame Yolande’s pride was yielding before her bitter distress. “M. du Val, you do not think that his thoughts go in the direction of Amaria?”

“What! The Court of Amaris! The Court of the Wicked Queen!”

Dame Yolande sighed and looked away, blushing at the necessity that made her talk of Amaris, here in the company of a man not even of her family. And then she saw the myrtle bushes begin to wave violently and unnaturally within a certain restricted radius, and a long figure rise as

though conjured up by a word.

“Raoul!”

“My lady—mother—”

“Raoul, you should not lie on the ground at this season of the year.”

“But I like to, my lady-mother. Besides, it is merely a superstition of our ancestors that one should not lie on the ground before mid-summer. And it gives me pleasure to disprove their prognostications. Mother, will you not accord me the same privilege as M. du Val? I would talk with you—”

Du Val bowed and withdrew. But now Raoul flung himself on the bench and fell to denuding the myrtle bushes of their April leaves, seeming now loath to talk.

“Were you—asleep—there on the ground?” his mother asked.

“Oh, yes, I was asleep,” yet there was that in his tone which did not quite convince the mother that he had not heard their conversation.

He said irrelevantly, "The garden is far advanced for April, is it not, lady-mother?"

"Yes, Raoul, and do you like the gardens as they are? Are there any changes that you would have—you who are Lord here?"

It seemed that the only change Raoul would have would be to have the myrtle bushes entirely bare of leaves. He was strewing them in a little mound.

"No, no, mother, they are well enough—for what they are. It is only that I am longing for something other—something entirely different."

Dame Yolande grew a little white with terror. "For what, Raoul?"

"I've been a long time not knowing, waking every day to the bewildered asking, and at night unsatisfied—. But now I know—, and you must not be pained, mother—, I would go to Amaria."

Then the horror was true. And one could not imagine anything more terrible than what could actually be. "Oh my son! Why can you not be contented here?"

"I am not sure that I wish to be contented, mother."

"In Heaven's name—what do you wish?"

"To feel—and know—and so to live completely."

"But is it not enough to feel and know what is good?"

Raoul rose and strode a few steps to the side of a sculptured Pan. Then he said:

"I would not pain you, mother, but it is not enough. I must feel and know evil, too—."

He saw her bend her head and he rushed on in justification:

"You do not know—how sick I am of all the things I have known! How unsatisfying they are! Father Anselm's ceremonies, M. du Val's dialectics—Abstractions, and I am so hungry for reality!"

She raised her heavy head. "It has such a bitter taste, Raoul. We older ones would drink anything to purge our mouths of it."

"But I must make myself ill on the same draught. I can not endure these unbiting, insipid liquids you would feed me. I want to grow drunk on what is crude and intense and most concentrated—and if I die of it, mother—why, I will die without it."

Behind him the little Pan grimaced, crude

and pagan, unmoral and beautiful as nature—an eternal denial that right and wrong are at the root of things. And Dame Yolande felt the memory of old desires for what was unrestrained and perilous. But she knew that such desires menaced what was most dear to her.

"The drink you want will not satisfy!—Only burn and tantalize and pervert—Oh, it is true, Raoul!"

"Will ordinary spring water satisfy?"

It would have been well if Dame Yolande could have lied to him then. She moaned: "Oh, no, it will not satisfy, either. And that is what is sad—yet it leaves the least of regrets."

Raoul's face was dark like Lucifer's. "Then it is not enough. There is insufficient for man in what is allowed, so I must taste of what is forbidden."

His mother moaned in the grass at his feet, but he had no pity for her.

"We are allowed to say over our Credos by rote; I would dare to disbelieve. We are allowed to rearrange in new syllogisms the world's old knowledge; I would push back the boundaries of human thinking! We are allowed to be a little happy; I would know ecstasy!—To be a saint who scourges himself for a voluptuous rapture, a libertine who wrecks his body for the uttermost stimulation of his sense!—Oh, I will die of this diluted living!"

Dame Yolande heard the panting of his fevered breathing. "If life is as you say—is good not good?"

Raoul had grown calmer. He sat down again beside her—sober when he felt the trembling of her body. Pitifully she challenged him:

"Is good not good?"

And Raoul nodded. "Yes, it is good. And in the end, perhaps, I will come back to it after adventuring.... Only now I am so full of the desperate need for what has nothing to do with it—just as this April day has nothing to do with it—"

His mother held his hand. "Then you will not stay?"

He only sat quite silent, because the gentleness of his nature forbade him to say no and the bitter necessity of his youth forbade him to say yes, but Dame Yolande knew the answer.

Shaped like a huge animal, the Amarian Isle

lay half submerged in the shallow waters of the lake, accessible to boats on only one side, where its crocodile head faced boldly out to the open waters, its rear sunk in the stagnant corruption of the marshes, where a weird phosphorescence played at night and the odors of putrescence rose like a heavy perfume that worked on the senses with a strange delight. Barges that were gorgeous with colors came and went, and from them figures like wraiths went up the paths to the enchanted court of Amaris, who was called "The Wicked Queen." Among them Raoul wandered with a woman who was provocative and beautiful, but not beautiful at all after the manner of the Lady Fleur or anything that was simple and natural. For her hair was dyed delicately green like the hybrid growths in the marshland, and her lips were encarnadined to the color of blood that is spilled and not the blood that flows normally under the skin. And her flesh inspired a desire that exceeded all normal desire as the exhilaration of wine exceeds the exhilaration of health. For days Raoul had been wild with love for this handmaiden of Amaris, who led him through the perfumed temples of Sense and taught him strange new rites in the service of Passion. Yet now his words to her were beginning to savor of weariness and disillusion.

"Can you not talk about anything, Elethea?"

And Elethea would seize his hand and draw him off to some bower lovelier than the last, where orchids leaned above their couch, palely glowing in the unnatural light that bathed all Amaria. And he would abandon himself to her beauty—but Elethea could not talk to him. And he was beginning to grow tired of the shape of her beautiful torso.

It was then that he began to notice another figure that moved about the Court of Amaris. Robed in scarlet and coifed with hair purple like a nightmare, Fornarea had eyes that were bleary with unnatural dreams. She was as hideous as fungus, and her body was mottled with strange colors as of disease. But to Raoul mere beauty was growing insipid, and he felt a new and keener stimulation in the ugliness of Fornarea. There was a decadent paradoxical pleasure in extracting bliss of the senses from the natural abhorrence of the senses.

Fornarea taught him much that was vile and

much that was fascinating. Her supreme hour came at night when a ghostly moon swooned in the embrace of the fierce clouds, who took her and eclipsed her and tossed her back to another as a maiden strumpeted among soldiers. Then Fornarea celebrated strange orgies and offered strange sacrifices to a demoniac god. She built fires of the dung of the sea-birds and over them brewed strange potions, pungent with the ammonia of the excretion, and acrid with an acidity that made all other food seem tasteless. Nor was she always yielding as Elethea had been. Sometimes, when he would embrace her, she rode off on a broom-stick, or she struck him with searing whips or bit him like a vampire. And she embraced others before his very eyes and took as lovers dark creatures that lived in the foul exhalations of the bog. Raoul was very unhappy, yet he pitied everyone who had never loved a witch.

It was a wild, unrestful life; yet Raoul sometimes fell to pondering the old questions to which he had found no answer in the books of the schoolman. Sometimes he tried to stop a demon or djinn that fluttered blackly around Fornarea's incantations, and ask him what was the meaning of life and what its destiny. But they all only looked at him with that supercilious air peculiar to demons or mortals who pretend to despise the question whose answer they do not know.

For days Fornarea had been unusually captious. She fled him through the rank growth of the marshes, and his hands that clutched for her clutched oozy mosses or the cold coils of reptiles; till at last he caught her—faint as he was with the exquisite torture of pursuit—and thrilled to bruise her body and stop off her breath with brutal domination. Then he knew that the only thing he wanted of her was knowledge—not sensation, but an answer to the riddle of living. And so as he held her gripped in fingers that exulted in inflicting pain, he asked his questions. Her provocative defiance melted; she seemed to fade and crumple, as she said:

"I have no more to give you. You are ready for Amaris."

Raoul felt no qualms at faithlessness to her who was faithlessness itself. He went to seek Amaris, who was greater than all her handmaidens. He carefully prepared his petition, and

her great Majordomo, dressed not in the guise of a monk but of Mefistofeles disguised as a monk, conducted him through the long corridors of the palace.

And as he penetrated inward the yellow colorings of Amaris's palace grew not more vivid and golden, but ever paler and more ambiguous, till at length in the inmost chamber there was almost a negation of color, or such a faint, shadowy, indeterminate shade as partook of all colors by phases. Another change, too, was observed in progress from the golden outer corridors to the inlying rooms; less and less of voluptuous luxury attended that progress, till at length, in the final chamber was only an airy bareness around the unglittering throne of Amaris. But Raoul knelt, strangely awed by this negation of all splendors, and did not dare to raise his eyes till a voice bade him rise, as though it were weary of all bidding. Then he beheld Amaris, who was the soul and genius of this wicked place. She was robed in the strange, ambiguous yellow of the room; her hair the self-same color, and her eyes no less indeterminate in shade. Thin almost to meagerness, Amaris was not beautiful like Elethea nor gaudy and outrageous after the manner of Fornarea. But her great indeterminate colored eyes held one like fate, and even in the first moment of seeing, one abandoned will and desired to be her creature. And Raoul, who had not lost self-possession before the mad transports to which his first mistresses introduced him, quite lost it before her immense indifference. He only stammered the questions he had thought to ask her on the meaning of life and its destiny. But she seemed to divine through his broken utterance. And then she smiled with



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a smile as unlike the laughter of natural creatures as the music of the most sophisticated and complex souled composer to the unconscious utterance of a brook. And she told him, "You would be answered? Then know that there is no answer. The enigma has no solution, the game no prizes after all. Yet must you ever spend your life seeking, sadly and funnily, and when at length you resign yourself to never finding, that will be the saddest and funniest of all."

And through the days Raoul went to the school of Amaris. He went far on the roads of all philosophies, even some which had not yet been dreamed of in the world, and the magic bareness of her chamber made the process of thought swift and sure as the lightning, so that in one flash he saw more than men had taken years to devise. And at the end of every road he found the ambiguously yellow wall of utter nescience. And bit by bit he grew to understand more clearly the mind of Amaris who had tested all things and denied all things, not as the mystic denies them to assert some higher value, but absolutely, because they were not good enough. Nothing was ignored by her; no category of thought or experience possible to mortality that did not have its suggestion in some word or glance or movement of her body. Even flashes of pity and tenderness and love that was maternal emanated from her, as the ambiguous yellow of her robe took on varying nuances in the light. Emotions of evil as well as of good passed cloud-like over her aspect—for to her all preferences were illusions—but seldom was any emotion or idea deeply enough received for translation into action. The deep center of her being was unmoved, and whether at that center was simply inertia or chaos or deep, almost inhuman fortitude was something Raoul never could discover. Sometimes he almost suspected that it was the last, most extravagant degree of humor, being an imperfected sympathy with everything that was. But if it were humor it had lost all its jubilation, like a musical string that has been strung too tightly, that gives out sweet vibrations until, dawn to its extreme tautness, it is silent.

The only facts whose claim she seemed to acknowledge were bodily needs, not even bodily indulgences. As she lay with Raoul for the satisfaction of the wants of his body, she was

strange or cool or ironic. One day he said to her, "You have inoculated me with your world-weariness, Amaris. The edges of all things blur off into unreality, and a doubt robs every sensation of sweetness as of bitterness. I will be weary of everything, save only of you, Amaris."

But she smiled at his vain hope. "You will be weary of me with every breath you draw. You will have only the hope that some day you may forget me and live thoughtlessly and believingly as other men. But you will never be able to forget me—and there will be times when it will seem to constitute all your glory to have known me so well."

"And what is the end of your votaries, goddess? Do you kill us with your indifferent hand?"

"Some die from having known me; some plunge in the abyss of mortal extinction; but most live on, and do the normal things, but with less heart than the normal, and guard always a memory of a dark principle of negation at the root of mortal things."

Dame Yolande's favorite seat in the chateau Trentanaye commanded a view of the drawbridge and portcullis through which Raoul must enter. She used to sit for hours with her work in her hand, watching for some glimpse of a plumed chevalier, who should be returning to her. Sometimes she talked to M. du Val, because she had to talk to someone.

"Oh, he will come back, M. du Val. One can not live forever with Amaris; such is not in mortal possibilities. Yet he can live there long enough to imbibe that which shall ruin all other living. Oh, why does he not come back?"

M. du Val frowned slightly, being not at all eager for the return of his erstwhile charge—for if he loved Raoul little, he loved his mother's estate very much.

"What said he in that last conversation?"

"Oh, much of discontent and desire. I could not argue with him. He was very eloquent—and I was only right. Yet he spoke only as one who is weary of goodness and courts sin for the moment's novelty, out of avidness for seeing the other face of things. Yet always did he acknowledge that it was sin. There lies my hope. Did he begin to question such distinctions, I would really fear. To be intentionally perverse is

not to be perverted." So spoke Dame Yolande, with wistful eyes upon the ribbon of road.

But Raoul did not come at any time they were talking thus of him, nor at any of those times when a hopeful premonition made his mother spread out banners for his coming and on some pretence bring Lady Fleur to Trentanaye from her neighboring estate. He came, instead, on the day when his mother had at last decided to marry Monsieur du Val. She had not ceased to want Raoul to return, but that want—from being the aching center of her life—had become only an incident. She thought of him as worse than dead, yet somehow that thought did not prevent her from being very much interested in the embroidering of the pearls upon her wedding dress.

The warder with his orders would have stopped Raoul at the gate. "Ho! you go not within, my gallant. There is to be a wedding then." Then, in recognition, "Lord Raoul!"

"Yes, it is I. And who is being married within?"

"Lord, it is your Lady Mother who weds your one time tutor."

But if the warder had expected to see his young Lord wrathful, he was disappointed. "So! My mother is wise to take her fill of living and loving while there is time. And for that purpose a tutor is surely as good as a lord."

So he went within and found his mother in the hands of her tiring women. She would have given over the wedding, but he would not have it so.

"My son, I had hoped to see another wedding ere this. But I suppose your heart is quite gone from the Lady Fleur?"

"I am not sure, mother. There has been nothing in my experience to make impossible a marriage de convenience, which I believe turns out as well as any other kind." And in his heart he



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The tuba player kisses his girl

thought if this project would make his mother happy he scarcely cared enough to resist—though there could be no forgetting for him who had loved Elethea, burned for Fornarea, and found in Amaris the ultimate principle of the universe.

"And what did you at Amaria?" said his mother, who hoped that his answer would not be too frank.

"I felt to the limits of all feeling—and thought to the ends of all thinking, indulged every natural desire to the utmost of satisfaction and then created new desires artificially. And life was full of brilliant colors, yet all merged at last into a sort of ambiguous yellow which was like watery sunlight on a day of rain—or the bewilderment

and the satire at the root of all things.”

But such talk was puzzling to Dame Yolande on the day of her second marriage, which she hoped would turn out better than her first.

“But saw you Amaris?”

“Yes, mother, and see her always—in you and my thoughts of the Lady Fleur and in all things.”

“What can you mean, Raoul? For while,

perhaps, in appearance no woman would be grieved to hear that she resembled Amaris, surely she is the very spirit of wickedness on this earth.”

But Raoul smiled in the tolerance which he had acquired, as though he found the expression naive.

“No, I do not think she is very wicked, mother.”

THE LAST DUMB DORA GAG

Then there's the flapper who is so dumb she refused to go to a drinking movie called “Bottoms Up,” because she thought it was a nudist picture.