


The Dame and Pythias



by

Frank R. Adams

IT was a slack morning in the store, and hot besides. Customers were few and indolent. The season was conducive to confidences.

"Do you believe much in fortune tellers?" Fannie Herman asked of her counter-mate in the ladies' silk hosiery section.

"Well," Mabel carefully inserted a blond pencil into her knot of black hair before replying, "I don't know that I'm in a position to say, dearie. I've had a lot of nice things predicted for me," she offered with a mouselike smile, "but I'm too young yet to tell whether they're going to come true or not."

"I just asked to sort of get your point of view before telling you what happened to me," Fannie explained amiably, patting her pompadour, her collar, and her hips in the order named to assure herself that she was looking her trim best.

"I guess I told you once about a couple of fellows I've been going with for the past year, ain't I? Nice boys, both of them are, and when they wash the graphite and grease off their hands and faces after the whistle blows over at the automobile factory, they'd pass for white men anywhere. One is named Nick Hopper,

he's the oldest, and the other is Hardy Nelson, as nice a Swedish boy as ever came over from the old country up in Minnesota. They're both good mechanics and they get good pay there at the factory.

"The only objection I ever had to Nick and Hardy was that they stuck so close together. Those lads were as strong for each other as if they had been brought up on the same bottle of liquid glue. They certainly were good company for themselves. One package of tobacco was enough for both of 'em because they were never out of sight of each other. That certainly is grand when it comes to whacking up living expenses and devising ways and means of deceiving the landlady, but it ain't such a much if you carry it to extremes like mixing it in your love affairs.

"Unfortunately, them two lads didn't fall in love with a brace of twins like they should, but instead they both picked on me. You can imagine how much fun that was. Just sitting in the parlor with two gentlemen friends or going to band concerts and movies with the same does moderately well for the time being, but in order to get real intimate with anybody of the opposite sex a girl has got to let him hold her

hand in the dark occasionally and fight with him about whether or not she is going to kiss him good night.

“Things went on like that for nearly a year, and I was seriously considering the idea of adopting a cat and being an old maid when they came to me together and said they wanted to marry me.

“ ‘Which one?’ I asked sort of surprised because I had given up hope.

“ ‘Whichever one you want,’ replied Nick. ‘There ain’t any other way to settle it. We’ve tried to but can’t. I’ve been urging Hardy to do it for the last six months but he insists on me having you, so we can’t get anywhere.’

“ ‘Nick will make the best husband for you, Fannie,’ Hardy urged. ‘He works faster than I do and makes more money.’

“ ‘But I don’t save it the way Hardy does,’ Nick pointed out. ‘He’s got a roll in the bank.’

“ ‘Half of it’s yours when you need it, Nick,’ his pal said, putting his hand on his shoulder.

“Can you beat it? Those two lads stood there hurling bouquets at each other until their arms gave out. It was just like that movie we saw last week, you remember, don’t you, Mabel, the one where the guys wore mostly sheets instead of clothes, and one of ’em was going to die for the other.”

“I got you,” Mabel responded immediately to the description. “It was just grand. The name of it was ‘The Dame and Pythias,’ I think.”

“That’s it,” agreed Fannie. “Nick and Hardy was just like them guys in the picture except they were all dressed, complete.

“When they put it to me that way I didn’t know what to do. You know how it is when you’ve only got a dollar to spare from lunch money and Jordan’s is advertising a perfectly elegant near-German-silver mesh-bag for ninety-eight cents and The Fair is having a run the same day on ninety-nine-cent envelope

chemises with almost hand-made lace insertion. A girl don’t know where to put her money.

“I told Nick and Hardy I’d have to think it over. I made one condition though. I said they’d have to cut out the team play.

“ ‘I don’t care how you arrange it,’ I said as kindly as I could, because I saw that the idea was hard for them to understand, ‘but I’ve got to get used to looking at you one at a time if you really mean business.’

“They stood for it and we arranged how Nick was to call Monday, Wednesday, and Friday evenings and Hardy on the other evenings except Sunday which was to be a mass meeting as usual of all the parties concerned.

“It looked as if things was going to be a lot livelier—there was more chance for a heart interest, as the book reviewer says. I figured that in a week’s time I could have those boys just as friendly with each other as the Kaiser and King George.

“I wasn’t entirely wrong about the heart interest part anyway. After a few rehearsals I got Nick so he knew what to do with my hand when I left it accidental in his lap. Hardy was more trouble. The average Swedish lad seems to have an idea that the way to win a girl is to wear her out by talking about the weather. He was a bum performer but I knew from something in his eye that he would be a whirlwind if he ever got started. So I nursed him along, and finally one night I nearly scared him to death by letting him kiss me good night when all he meant to do was help me off with my coat.

“But what do you think that poor fish did? He went and apologized to Nick about it. I nearly cried when I heard that. How do I know? I’ll tell you. I went to the window to look at him once more when he left the house. Will you believe me he hadn’t no more than got out the door when somebody meets him

under the lamp post? It was Nick, and he'd been waiting to walk home with Hardy. Hardy wouldn't go with him until he had explained what a pup he'd been by kissing his friend's best girl. Thank Heaven some men ain't so particular. Otherwise what would we do for magazine stories?

"I was near discouraged. All my smooth work didn't amount to much if they were going to get out extras about it. You can't put over a plot very successful if they keep a spotlight on you all the time. Occasionally you have to pull a little rough stuff. The quickness of the hand deceives the eye all right most of the time, but it ain't considered good form to make the magician take off his coat and show where the extra ace of spades is attached to the rubber band in his sleeve. Even Houdini couldn't do some of his best stuff if he had to work in sight of the audience when he slips them handcuffs off.

"We been going to White City a good deal this summer. They got a swell band out there this season, and the dance floor in the pavilion is something elegant. Hardy ain't so light on his feet as a steam tractor, but Nick can dance a good deal better than Pavlowa, and I've seen 'em both.

"I think there is something in Hardy's religion that makes it a sin to dance, although the way he does it it ain't so much a sin as it is a crime, which ought to be punishable by fine and imprisonment. Nick, though, hasn't got any impediment in his feet whatever, and when I was fox-trotting with him I could almost forget the places where I'd been stepped on by the world's champion Scandinavian horse-shoer.

"But Hardy had his good points. As I said before, an expert could tell that all he needed was bringing out, and besides it wasn't possible entirely to forget that bank-roll that he had put away in the First National. In some ways cash comes in a lot handier after

marriage than the ability to waltz with both hands tied behind you.

"So I didn't decide right away. As a matter of fact I was enjoying it more than the boys. They got a little haggard, both of 'em, and had a worried look around the eyes.

" 'Can't you decide?' asked Nick on Monday or Wednesday evening, I forget which—anyway it was his night to be with me.

" 'No, I can't,' I admitted regretful. We were at White City, and the band was playing that new piece of Irving Berlin's just as loud as they could. It was as romantic as anything, with the splash of the water in the 'Shoot the Chutes,' and all the electric lights turned on full horse power.

" 'Let's ask Rajah Bong about it,' he suggested, desperate.

" 'Gee,' I answered kind of took back. 'Do you know how much the Rajah charges?'

" 'Yes.' Nick gulped a little. 'Five dollars for a complete reading, but for two bucks he'll give you an answer to one question.' Which was lucky for Nick because he never had five dollars all at once in his life—anyway not an hour after he was paid off and had settled with the guys he had borrowed off of during the week.

" 'Rajah Bong is about the most élite attraction at White City this season. If you've been out there you've probably been past his place. There ain't any ballyhoo spieler outside, and the sign above the door ain't printed in letters over a foot high. Everything is dignified. He don't have to advertise because everybody knows about him anyway. All he has to do is just touch your hand and he can tell you who you're going to marry, how many children you'll have, and whether or not some rich relative is going to die and leave you money.

"I guess any girl is sort of crazy about getting some dope on the future from

somebody that's on the inside. I fell for the Rajah Bong idea right off the reel. He charged so much for information it seemed like he must be a friend of somebody pretty high up.

"So I agreed to leave it up to the Rajah and become engaged to whichever of 'em he said. I might just as well. If I was going to anyway there was no harm in finding out and saving a lot of worry making up my mind.

"We went over to Rajah's concession. There was just an even dozen waiting to see him, and a colored man in a red kimona gave us a number and told us to wait, something like in a barber shop.

"The place was all fixed up like a window-trimmer having delirium tremens, lots of turkey red hangings from the upholstery department of the five-and-ten-cent store, and sword bayonets from the Spanish War fixed on the walls in pairs, crossed. Black curtains with tinsel moons and stars sewed on 'em hung across an inner door, and over it was some printing in Russian or Yiddish or some Bohunk language. I've found out since that it's a quotation from the Old Testament and means, 'Watch your step and have your money ready.'

"Rajah Bong was certainly tending strictly to business that evening. It wasn't over half an hour before he got to me and there was a dozen people ahead. Even at two dollars a throw he was making enough every hour to buy a set of tires for an automobile. And some of the patients was loosening up for five-dollar treatments. You could tell that by the way they went into a corner and dug down into the holeproof vault when the colored gent asked 'em to contribute.

"Nick had two dollars right in his hand when it got to me. It was all in silver, and we'd both kicked in on it because he didn't have enough. The colored person took it away from him and threw it in a bag he was carrying as if it was too much trouble to count

it.

" 'Write yo' question here,' the colored man said, giving me a pad of paper and a pencil stub. 'The Rajah has to have something that you have touched in his hand before he can answer.'

" 'What shall I write?' I asked Nick.

" 'Ask him who you're going to marry,' Nick answered. 'That's all we want to know.'

"So I wrote that on the paper, and the darky took it careless and went behind the curtain. It was only a minute before he was back and said: 'Rajah Bong will receive yo'.' He said it just like that, grand, like in a book.

"I had to leave Nick outside and go in alone.

"Inside there was only a little room, but it was certainly fixed up swell. Everything was black, with skulls on it in white. There was a couple of regular skulls, too, on the table that had electric lights in 'em for eyes. A brass dish had a little fire in it that made a funny-smelling kind of smoke, like that Japanese nonsense you burn to attract the mosquitoes when you sit out on the front steps in the evening.

"The Rajah Bong had a skull in his hand, and was sitting sidewise looking at it sorrowful-like, as if he was saying, 'Alas, poor Horlick!' Neither of 'em looked at me when I come in, but in a minute a little smoke oozed out of the skull's eyes. I recognized the smell of Pirates' Delight cigarettes in a minute. I suppose smoking 'em was what killed him. They say that after inhaling ten, you have to send for the pulmotor.

"The rajah was a little man, but he looked terrible dignified and solemn in a black Mother Hubbard, with spangles on it and a hassock, or something Oriental anyway, wound around his head.

" 'Abacadabra,' he said in a deep, sorrowful voice.

“ ‘No,’ I corrected him. ‘The name is Fannie Herman.’

“ ‘I know that,’ he said, weary. ‘Nothing is concealed from Rajah Bong. I know everything.’

“ ‘Wasn’t it wonderful, his knowing my name? And I had never set eyes on him before in all my life.

“ ‘I know,’ he went on in the same tone of voice, ‘that you belong to the frail sect called woman, created to be the despair of man. And you are going to marry a young man with dark hair and eyes-brows, dressed in a suit of dark-blue clothes and a pair of yellow shoes.’

“ ‘He couldn’t have described Nick better if he had seen him. He even knew the kind of clothes he had on.

“ ‘Well, that settled it. I went out and told Nick what the Rajah Bong had said. I hated the idea of losing Hardy for good, especially when I remembered how careless Nick was with his pay, but the thought of the way Nick could dance sort of evened things up.

“ ‘I suppose we’re engaged then,’ I said after I had got tired waiting for him to mention it.

“ ‘Uh-huh,’ he admitted, just as cheerful as if somebody had poisoned his dog.

“ ‘It ain’t a funeral, you know,’ I reminded him. ‘The minister ain’t going to say, “Ashes to ashes and dust to dust,” when he hitches us.’

“ ‘It ain’t that,’ said Nick. ‘I was thinking of Hardy. This is going to break him all up when he hears about it.’

“ ‘Do you think he’s so crazy about me that he can’t stand it?’ I asked, a little worried myself. I didn’t want to drive anybody to a carbolic-acid cocktail. ‘Don’t you suppose he can get along without me?’

“ ‘I was thinking how lonesome he’s going to be when I’m gone.’ Nick was as mournful as a bride kissing her mother good-by. ‘I guess we’ll have to have Hardy come and live with

us,’ he said.

“ ‘Nothing like it. Play something else, that piece is out of your range. After we’re married you’re going to be allowed to invite Hardy over for dinner once a month, if he’ll promise not to cry on the parlor rug. Play that both ways for me.’

“ ‘Nick was sort of set back, but he saw that I meant it, and said no more about it.

“ ‘ ‘Anyhow,’ he decided as he left me at the door after taking me home that night, ‘let me break it to him. Maybe he won’t take it so hard if I tell him.’

“ ‘I agreed to that. There wasn’t any particular reason why I wanted to gloat over the poor Swede’s misery.

“ ‘But I wasn’t quite prepared for what happened the next night when Hardy Nelson showed up, grinning all over his map, and said he was going to take me out to White City.

“ ‘I looked at him, doubtful.

“ ‘ ‘Where’s Nick?’ I asked.

“ ‘ ‘I don’t know,’ Hardy answered. ‘This ain’t his evening to call.’

“ ‘I saw what had happened. Nick had lost his nerve, and hadn’t been able to spring the bad news on his tow-headed friend. What could I do? Nothing. I had promised my fiancé I wouldn’t tell. So I trotted along with Hardy out to White City as if nothing had happened.

“ ‘ ‘Nick has a great scheme,’ he tells me on the way out. ‘I’m going to take you to the Rajah Bong and let him settle which one of us you’re going to marry. Is that all right with you?’

“ ‘I saw it all. It was clever of Nick, wasn’t it? Instead of telling Hardy himself, the fortune-teller would do it for him, and, of course, Hardy wouldn’t take it so hard coming sort of direct from fate that way. The scheme was so pretty that I fell for it right away. It would cost Hardy a couple of bucks that he didn’t really need to spend, but then he had money to burn, if you counted that bankroll

which I wasn't so much interested in helping him save any more.

"So we went to Rajah Bong's place as soon as we hit the park. It was early, and there was nobody waiting in the outside room. So they maced Hardy for a couple of iron men right away, and I wrote my question on the paper and went into the cell where they kept the rajah.

"He was still looking at his bone-head friend, and, without glancing at me, he said solemnly, '*Abacadabra*.'

"This time I didn't argue about it. He reached out and took my hand.

" 'You want to know something about marriage,' he said, all mysterious, but still looking at Horlick and talking as if he was a long ways off. 'I see before you a beautiful youth with light hair and blue eyes, who takes your hand and leads you to the altar.'

"Then, still holding my hand, he turned toward me for the first time. I saw a sort of puzzled look come into his eyes, as if he thought he had seen me somewhere before, but couldn't remember where.

" 'Beautiful girl,' he said, 'your soul and mine have met before. They speak to each other. What does it mean?'

"I didn't tell him, because probably he knew, anyway, and was just asking questions to let me think I was in on it.

"Besides I had a lot of things that was worrying me more at that moment. Where did I stand? How did it come that fate picked out two different husbands on two evenings one right after the other? This second night he had described Hardy Nelson just as if he was a brother. There was no mistaking it. And Hardy was out in the other room where the rajah couldn't possibly see him.

"It was too much for me. I went out and told Hardy what the rajah had said, and we agreed to be engaged. I didn't know what else to do.

"But he asked me not to tell Nick, and said that he would spring the news himself. This suited me down to the ground, because I didn't know how I was going to explain to either lad what had happened. After they had scrapped it out among themselves, they could come to me with the decision."

"How did the boys settle it?" asked Mabel eagerly.

"They didn't," Fannie drawled tantalizingly. "Each one is afraid to tell the other for fear it will break him all up. Neither of 'em can sleep nights for worrying so about how the other one is going to take it."

"Ain't that awful," Mabel sympathized. "Who is this lad trying to attract your attention?"

Fannie looked carelessly toward the other end of the counter where stood a bashful young man of heavy-weight build, who was covered with crimson blushes at finding himself in the proximity of so much feminine hosiery.

"It's Hardy," Fannie murmured in amazement. "What can he be doing here during shop hours?"

She moved toward him nevertheless, and Mabel, curious, edged down as close as possible without appearing to be listening deliberately.

"What's the matter, Hardy?" Fannie inquired of the agitated youth. "Are you starting on a honeymoon all by yourself? What's the idea?"

"I've left the shop," he said, "and I've come to tell you that our engagement is off. The foreman said he'd have to lay one of us off for the slack season, and I went to him afterward so Nick wouldn't know and told him I'd be the one to quit. I just couldn't tell Nick I was going to take you away from him, so you'll have to marry him. I'm going away off somewhere, but I hope you'll both be happy."

Without giving her a chance to make any protest he turned and fled precipitately, while Fannie, barred from pursuit by store rules, could only murmur feebly:

"Can you beat that?"

She was still muttering to herself when another man approached from the other aisle.

"Nick!" she exclaimed.

"Yeh," he admitted gloomily. "I been waiting for Hardy to clear out so I could speak to you alone."

"What is it?"

"Listen, sis, I can't do it. The marriage thing, I mean. Hardy is crazy about you, and I couldn't bear to take you away from him. He's known there was something up for a long time, and it's been worrying him. He ain't said anything, but I've seen him getting thinner every day. Why, that boy has dropped from two hundred and seventeen pounds down to two hundred and twelve in the last three weeks.

"If he was to hear for sure that you and me was going to get hitched, it would put him down and out. So I'm going to call off our engagement. I think too much of Hardy. He can have you. I'm going to find him and tell him now. I just quit my job at the shop so he'll be making enough to get married on. I can get along somehow until I get something else. Good-by, Fannie. I'll come and see you sometime after you're married."

He, too, breathless from his impassioned speech, rushed off in the direction taken by his comrade, leaving Fannie, who probably held the world's record by being jilted twice in ten

minutes, rearranging her hair and touching her neck-band and smoothing her skirt over her hips to assure herself that at least externally she was still the same girl.

"Ain't that dreadful?" sympathized Mabel, disclosing amazingly intimate knowledge of the conversation that had just taken place. "They were both awful handsome boys, too. What are you going to do? You could sue 'em for breach of promise."

"I won't bother about 'em," said Fannie nonchalantly. "I don't think I'll even tell my husband about it."

"Your husband? What do you mean—husband?"

"I am the Rajaherine Bong," Fannie announced with a careless gesture. "We was married last evening. His real name is Clarence Weinberg, and he is making too much money to be a bachelor. As soon as my week is out here, I'm going to take the colored man's place collecting the coin for fortunes from the simps in the ante-room."

Mabel regarded her with ill-concealed envy.

"Gee, don't you have all the luck? But the rajah made a dreadful mistake, didn't he, when he told you first that your husband would have dark hair and then the next night said he would be a blond. That was an awful blunder, wasn't it?"

"No. The Rajah Bong never makes mistakes. He knows everything. What he meant was that his own hair is dark now, but it's only dyed, and is coming in yellow at the roots."