

Chapter 3: *The Virtue of Padlocked Wives*

QUEEN SCHEHERAZADE reached the door of Eve's house a little out of breath. She had been waylaid on the sidewalk, it appeared, by Mr. Casanova and Captain Potiphar, both very much the worse for liquor, and had experienced considerable difficulty in getting rid of them.

"I hope I'm not late," she gasped. "Fancy those ridiculous old idiots, scarcely able to stand, insisting on my bringing them in. Mr. Casanova is terrible—runs after every girl in Hades, I'm told. Or rather totters. He's too feeble to run. When I left him he was making love to a lamp post. Actually had his arms about it. Hopeless, my dears. I should hate to have been given *his* punishment."

"Are you sure you saw my husband?" Mrs. Potiphar asked, a dangerous gleam in her eye.

Ladies in Hades

“Perfectly, my dear. I recognized him by his uniform as captain in the Memphis Mounted Marines. And while it may have been quite imposing in Rameses’ day, it possesses certain deficiencies shared by that of the Scotch Highlanders when one has fallen head-first into an ash can.”

Mrs. Potiphar at once left the room. When she returned a few moments later there was a smile of satisfaction upon her somewhat sardonic face.

“What did you do to him, darling?” Cleopatra asked.

“Turned him over to the police, of course. I can’t be annoyed by a drunken husband, especially one who insists upon showing his very worst side to the public. May I have one of your cigarettes?”

“Certainly, dear. And I quite agree with you that such exhibitions of man’s lower nature——”

“Quiet, please!” Eve cried, “while Scheherazade tells us about padlocked wives. If you ask my opinion, I’d say that only a husband would be foolish enough to attempt anything so use-

The Virtue of Padlocked Wives

less, but then, men have strange ideas. Go ahead, dearie. We are all tremendously interested."

Queen Scheherazade faced her little audience with an apologetic smile.

"Don't be alarmed, girls," she murmured. "I have no intention of boring you with the story of my life. But since Eve has mentioned my record as a long-distance bedtime entertainer perhaps you might like to hear how it was that I had to lie awake for a thousand and one nights, telling my husband fairy stories when I might have been getting my beauty sleep. I assure you it was not just to hear the sound of my voice.

"My husband, Shariar—he wasn't my husband then, although he had had enough wives to know how to treat one—was Sultan of Arabia at the time of which I speak, with headquarters at Bagdad. And his brother Shahzenan held down the same job in Persia.

"One day Shariar, who hadn't heard from his brother for some time, decided he would like to see him. So he wrote him a letter and invited him down to the Big City for a couple of months, to take in the sights. There were some

Ladies in Hades

snappy new shows in town, he said, and one of the night clubs had just put on a nautch girl dancing act from India that was the limit.

“When Shahzenan read the letter he decided that a trip to Bagdad was just what he needed. He had been working very hard at the sultan business all winter and felt that a change would do him good. So he wrote back telling his brother he would take the next caravan. He did not think it best to bring Mrs. Shahzenan, he said, because she didn’t care for night clubs and anyway she wasn’t much of a traveler and the motion of a camel made her sick.”

“Isn’t that just like a man,” Lucrezia Borgia interrupted. “My second husband was the same way. Always dashing off somewhere and leaving me home. That’s why I had to get rid of him. But I gave him a beautiful funeral.”

“Ladies—ladies!” Eve exclaimed. “Please do not interrupt.”

“So one afternoon a couple of weeks later,” Scheherazade went on, “Shahzenan kissed his wife good-by and promised to write and climbed on his camel. But he had no more than reached camp the first night, when he discovered that

The Virtue of Padlocked Wives

his Head Valet had forgotten to pack the new silk pajamas he had ordered especially for the trip.

“This annoyed Shahzenan excessively, so after having cut the valet’s ears off and given the rest of the servants a taste of the bastinado, he said the only way to get anything done right was to do it yourself, and he would ride back to town and find those pajamas before he went another step. It was necessary, for the sake of the family, he said, to have those pajamas in order to make a good impression in Bagdad.

“When he got to the palace and had slipped in the back way so as not to disturb his wife, he was very much surprised to find a party going on in the harem. It was not a large party—just Mrs. Shahzenan and the palace gold-fish polisher—but it was a lively one. The wife was all dressed up in a pink chiffon handkerchief and was teaching her boy friend how to do the Samarcand Slide. There was also a jug of Shahzenan’s best private stock on the table. Naturally he lost his temper.

“‘It is bad enough,’ he said to the young man, drawing his scimitar, ‘to find you making love

Ladies in Hades

to my wife, although I can get another wife without much trouble. But where do you think I am going to buy any more of that pre-Babylonian liquor?' So he carved up Mrs. Shahzenan and her boy friend as neatly as possible and threw them out of the window.

"When he got back to the caravan he did not say anything about what had happened, but his spirits were low. It hurt his feelings to think how he had trusted that woman, giving her the key to the royal wine cellar and everything. Women, he said, were a deceitful lot, and he was through with them.

"Shariar, who came down to the Bagdad caravan station to meet him, saw that his brother was not feeling himself but he did not ask any questions, thinking that possibly Shahzenan might have drunk something that disagreed with him on the way down. He had arranged several big parties for the first week but Shahzenan wouldn't go to any of them. He was tired out, he said, and wanted a few days rest.

"One night, not long after his arrival in Bagdad, he was sitting in his room reading the Koran and reflecting on the general worthless-

The Virtue of Padlocked Wives

ness of women, when he heard quite a commotion outside his window.

“Everybody in the palace supposed he had gone with the rest of the crowd to see the new Senegambian Scandals, and up to now the place had been very quiet.

“Hearing the noise, Shahzenan threw open his window lattice and almost fell head first into the rose bushes. There was Mrs. Shariar, dressed in her birthday suit, taking a swim in the pool.

“She was not alone, either. There was a handsome young sheik with her, to say nothing of a bevy of boys and girls belonging to the younger set, and Shahzenan decided he had not missed a thing by staying home from the show. Bagdad society, he said to himself, was nothing if not modern. Mrs. Shariar and her friends were acting as though husbands were something no lady ever bothered her head about, until the rent came due. When they began some serious petting, Shahzenan sank back into his chair with a groan.

“‘This marriage business,’ he muttered, ‘is just a nice fairy story—only you’ve got to be in

Ladies in Hades

your second childhood to believe in it. Here I have been pitying myself for the way my wife treated me and poor brother Shariar is getting exactly the same sort of a deal. All women are liars. I'm through with them forever.'

"When Shariar staggered in about four A.M. and began to fix up a story to tell his wife about his chariot having developed tire trouble, Shahzenan sprang the glad news.

"'Never mind about your big blowout,' he cried. 'Anybody can see you have had one, at a glance. But while you were away I have been favored with a view of your wife which while flattering to your judgment as an art critic has revealed to me certain things about her not usually brought to the attention of the public. Shariar, old dear, I'm sorry to see you are in the cuckoo class, too.' Then he told his brother the whole story.

"Shariar took down the royal battle-ax from its hook behind the door.

"'I suppose,' he muttered, 'that I have got to do what every husband ought to do under the circumstances, provided his wife doesn't beat him to it.'

The Virtue of Padlocked Wives

“After the obsequies, the two brothers had a talk.

“‘As sultans,’ Shariar said, ‘we are evidently a pair of half-wits. We lock our wives up in their harems and imagine they are having a wonderful time darning the royal socks, and yet the moment our backs are turned they go right ahead and make monkeys of us just as though we both were a couple of traveling salesmen. Women are base deceivers. I’m off them for life.’

“‘What you say,’ Shahzenan replied, ‘meets my own views perfectly. “Suppose we give up being sultans for a while and go on a pilgrimage? As far as I am concerned, I feel that a change of air will do me good. And I do not intend to come back until I find a husband who has been given a worse deal by his wife than I have. What do you say?”

“Shariar admitted that he thought it a great idea. Women no longer interested him. He didn’t care if he never came back.

“‘Look here, Ali Baba,’ he told his Grand Vizier, ‘you run things in Bagdad for a while. Shahzenan and I are going out to find a married

Ladies in Hades

man whose wife has made a bigger fool of him than our wives have made of us.'

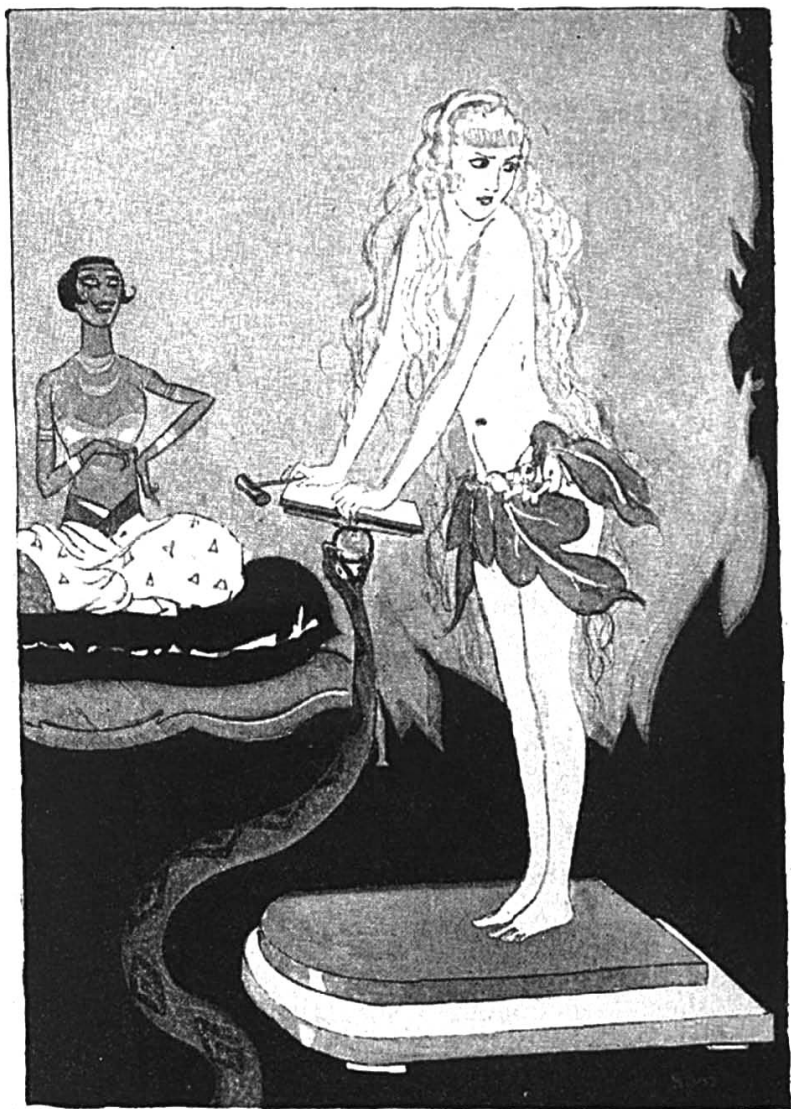
"The Grand Vizier said he didn't see why they should have any particular trouble in doing that. All women were bad, and those who weren't were worse. As for him he had given up expecting anything from them since his fifth wife ran off with an obelisk salesman from Cairo.

"'Deceit is their middle name, O Commander of the Faithful,' he said, 'and the two end ones are foolishness and vanity. I much prefer to live with a nice comfortable parrot. They may ask questions but you do not have to answer them.'"

"That is a libel on our sex!" Mrs. Potiphar cried, but Cleopatra dragged her back into her seat.

"Men always complain about our talking," she whispered, "but I've noticed that if a woman takes care to tell them how wonderful they are, they do not mind if she talks herself blue in the face. Sorry, Scheherazade. Go ahead."

"Well, as I was saying, the two brothers left Bagdad and wandered about for a long time,



"Ladies, ladies!" Eve pounded on the table. "Please do not interrupt."

The Virtue of Padlocked Wives

looking for a husband who was worse off than they were. But they could not seem to find one. All the married men they met said their wives were perfectly true to them, and why shouldn't they be, married to such attractive husbands.

"The two brothers snickered when they heard this, for they remembered having once felt that way themselves. But they did not say anything, and went on with their search.

"One day they arrived at the seashore, and sat down under a tree to rest. They had not been sitting there long when the breakers suddenly parted and a very disagreeable looking Afrite as big as a house came up out of the ocean carrying a chest on his back.

"The two brothers took one look at the meat-chopper which hung at his belt.

"This is no place for us," they said, and climbed up into the tree. But luck was against them. It was the only tree on the beach, and the Afrite came and sat down under it.

"Shariar and Shahzenan kept very quiet. They were not taking any chances. Pretty soon they heard a sound like someone knocking, inside the chest. The Afrite took a bunch of keys

Ladies in Hades

from his pocket and began to open the padlocks which held down the lid. When the last one was unlocked, and the top of the chest thrown back, a very good-looking young woman with bobbed hair stepped out.

“‘What do you want now?’ the Afrite asked in a sour voice.

“‘I want to be where I can see you, angel face,’ the bobbed-haired lady said, patting him on the cheek, ‘and I cannot stay locked up in that chest any longer because I am afraid that some unscrupulous hussy will try to vamp my great big beautiful boy while I am not looking. So if you do not mind I will sit here where I can see your face and, as I am sure you must be tired after your long walk, why do you not lie down and go to sleep? Mama will just stay here quietly and keep the flies off papa, and I notice there are a great many flies flying about although they do not seem to light on me.’

“Now of course Shariar and Shahzenan, being married men, had heard that kind of talk before, and they began to laugh so hard that they almost fell out of the tree. So the young person who had been in the box looked up and saw them.

The Virtue of Padlocked Wives

“‘Come down,’ she whispered, making signs to them. ‘My husband is asleep, and there is something I wish to say to you.’”

“She certainly was a rapid worker,” Salome laughed. “Did the sultans come down?”

“Oh, yes. They had to. She gave them to understand that if they did not do as she wished she would wake the Afrite up, and that would be the end of a perfect day-so far as they were concerned.

“When they got out of the tree she gave the two brothers the once over.

“‘We cannot talk here,’ she said, ‘because it might disturb my husband, and the poor dear needs his rest.’ So she took them into the bushes.

“Shariar glanced back in the direction of the tree.

“‘I think we had better be going,’ he said. ‘My brother and I have been married ourselves and we know how husbands feel when they wake up and find their wives talking to strange gentlemen.’”

“‘That will be all right,’ the bobbed-haired cutie told them. ‘My husband is a very sound

Ladies in Hades

sleeper. And besides, I want to show you something. You both seem a little depressed, and what I am about to show you is a very remarkable thing, and may cheer you up.' So she took a gold chain from her stocking and there were a lot of rings on it.

“‘What is the idea of all the jewelry?’ the sultans asked.

“‘Just some little souvenirs I have collected,’ the cutie laughed. ‘That dumb-bell over there swore when I married him that I should never look at another man. So he keeps me locked up in that chest, with all those padlocks on it, to make sure I will be true to him. Now being a perfect lady I do not like to boast, but there are ninety-eight rings on this chain, as you will find out if you care to count them, and as I see you are each wearing a rather nice one yourselves I would like you to hand them over, because I have set my heart on making it an even hundred.’”

Thais sprang to her feet.

“If that young woman can be located in Hades,” she said, “I move she be made a member of the club.”

The Virtue of Padlocked Wives

"The motion is out of order." Eve pounded on the table. "Let Scheherazade go ahead. What happened then, darling?"

"Well," Scheherazade laughed, "the way Shariar tells the story, courtesy prompted Shazzenan and himself to gratify the lady's wishes. They were afraid, he claims, that if they refused, she would wake up her husband, who might fail to understand their position. At any rate, they came back to Bagdad without their rings. And they decided that any man who locked his wife up in a box with twenty-four padlocks on it and still couldn't keep her true to him was decidedly worse off than they were.

"Naturally, Shariar was even more disgusted with women when he got back than he had been before. So after his brother had returned to Persia he concluded that the only way to have a wife you could be sure of was to marry a new one every night and send her to the guillotine the first thing after breakfast the next morning.

"This arrangement, while very pleasant indeed for the sultan, was not so good for the Bag-

Ladies in Hades

dad flappers. Any nice girl, they said, would be glad to be queen of the harem as a permanent job, but they did not think much of it as piecework. So when the stock of blushing brides began to run low I had an idea.

“Why not start in to tell this Bluebeard some spicy stories, I said to myself, and then break off just when the hero and heroine are headed neck and neck for the nuptial couch? That will get him so excited he will put off the execution for another night in order to find out what happens. So when my father, the Grand Vizier, informed me that I had been selected for the next victim I began my series of tales. As you know, the scheme worked so well that I kept it up for a thousand and one nights. By that time Shariar had gotten so used to me that he couldn't go to sleep without hearing the sound of my voice, so he made me the queen of the harem. But I've often thought what a pity it was we didn't have radios in those days—I could have tuned right in on the bedtime stories and gone out on a party.”

“I think you are quite right, my dear,” Phryne laughed, “when you say that no man can

The Virtue of Padlocked Wives

be sure about a woman until she is in her grave and even then it is problematical. Only the other night I happened to be talking to Henry the Eighth and he told me he was having a dreadful time keeping his seven wives in order. As for his mistresses, he had given them up as a bad job long ago."

Lucrezia Borgia was the only one of Scheherazade's listeners who did not seem greatly impressed.

"So far as I can see, my dear," she said, "your husband was pretty sure about you—at least for a thousand and one nights."

"Nights, yes," Scheherazade smiled. "But the poor dear lost so much rest lying awake listening to my yarns that he had to stay in bed all the next day in order to catch up on his sleep. That left me comparatively free, of course. The young officers of the palace guard were most attentive."

Mrs. Potiphar, who had been endeavoring to catch Eve's eye, rose.

"Speaking of padlocked wives," she said, "it is *my* opinion that any husband who tries to prevent his better half from doing anything she

Ladies in Hades

has set her mind on doing is a fool, padlocks or no padlocks. Take my own case, for example. No doubt you girls have all heard the scandalous tales which have been circulated about my husband's overseer, Joseph, and myself. Lies, my dears—nothing but lies. I never even looked at the fellow. But just the same there was a big date and fig man from Damascus who——”

“Sorry, my love,” Eve announced, “but I am afraid that like Scheherazade's husband we will have to wait for the rest of that story until another meeting. Supper must be almost ready.”

Marie, in the dining room, was about to open the door when she saw Adam, with his shoes clutched in one hand, tiptoeing in the direction of the kitchen. He stopped for a moment and put his arm around her.

“You are too nice a girl, Marie,” he said, “to have your morals corrupted by listening to those ancient eggs. What brought you to Hell, anyway?”

“Alas, monsieur, it resulted from an affair I had with a young American officer in Paris. We loved passionately—desperately——”

“Were you married?”

The Virtue of Padlocked Wives

“No, monsieur. That is what has caused all the trouble.”

“Well,” Adam laughed, “whether you are married or not often *does* make all the difference between Heaven and Hell. I’ve found that out myself. Look here—don’t say anything to my wife about my having gone out, will you? And the next time I see Satan I’ll speak to him about your case. Maybe we can find your sweetheart for you.” He vanished just as Eve threw open the door.