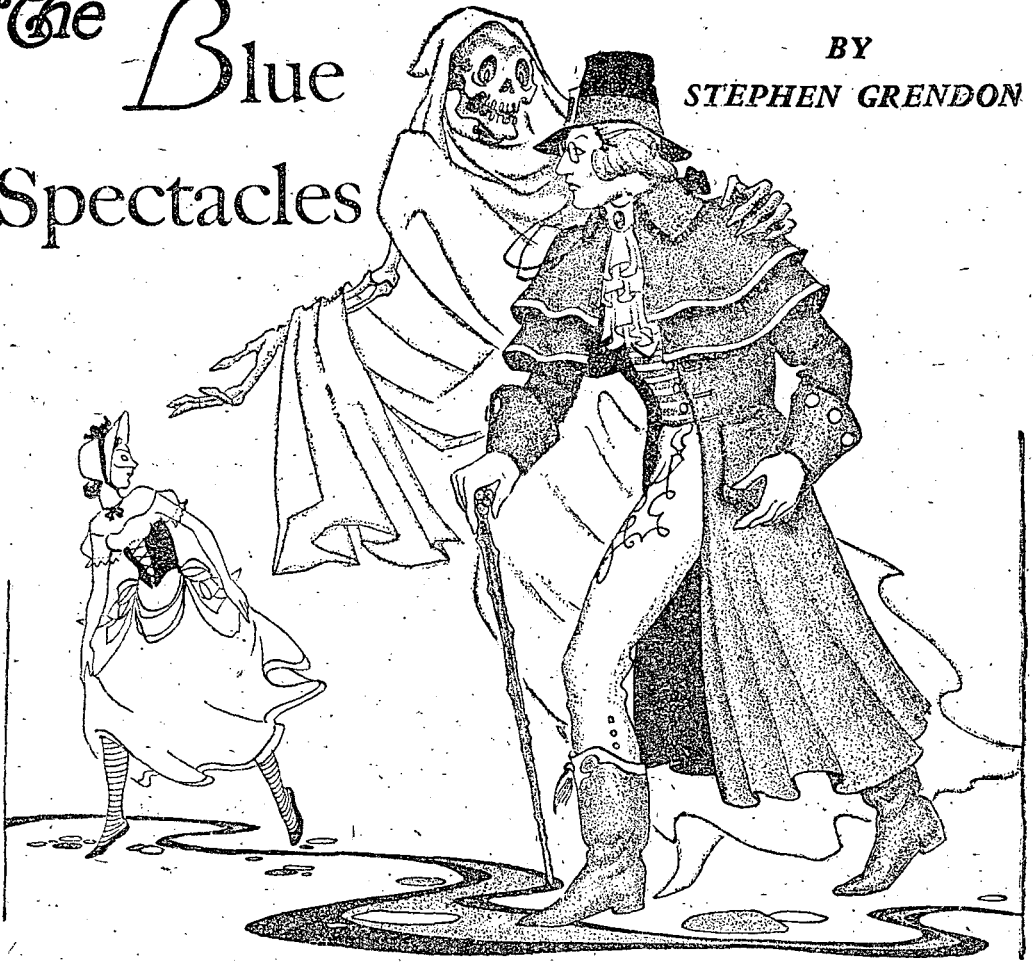


The Blue Spectacles

BY
STEPHEN GRENDON



WHEN he reached Cartagena, Jesse Brennan knew that his traveling was done. He was old, he was tired, and his illness had finally become too burdensome; he could not go on. A doctor confirmed it: he had perhaps a month to live, perhaps not that. Cartagena was sunny and warm; the Atlantic shone cobalt from dawn to dusk; the ancient walls of the old Colombian city pleased him. He had done more than one man's share of exploring, of poking about in the old places and the odd corners of the earth; he had no one to mourn him but a few old friends scattered over the globe; he might as well die in Cartagena as

anywhere. Back home in the United States it would be winter now, and he had no taste for winter—better the sun and the cloudless sky and the restless sea.

There remained the problem of disposing of those trifles he had collected—the things of value to fellow collectors. He set about this without delay, so that the burden of thinking about this final task might not cloud his last days. The stone clock of mysterious Indian origin could go to Faulkner in Cairo. Stuart could have the old German book bound in human skin. Rawlings, a hermit in his Edinburgh garret, would enjoy the curious figurines from Burma, and Vac-

lav would find Prague more interesting if he were the possessor of the Borgia ring. But to whom to send the blue spectacles? Ah, that was a problem! The old Chinese mandarin from whom he had got them had been convincingly solemn about the wonderful properties of the spectacles. Where, he wondered, could he find a man whose soul was "untouched" by sin, lest, by gazing through the blue glass something should befall him?

He thought about the disposal of the blue spectacles for two days. After he had packed and shipped everything else, the spectacles remained. But then, in the night, under a guileless moon, it came to him: Alain Verneil, of course! Too honest for his own good, too sincere to recognize hypocrisy, faithful, dogged, moral—yes, the blue spectacles would be safe with him, if indeed they had any of the properties attributed to them. He did not remember Verneil's address, nor could he find it anywhere in his things, but Verneil had been curator of some sort of museum in New Orleans, and he would doubtless be in the directory; so he did up the spectacles in a compact box, wrote a letter to enclose with his gift—"I got these from an old Chinese in Tibet. How old they are I don't know; he didn't know, either.

"They are reputed to be magic, in a peculiar way. If anyone who is not wholly good looks through them something will happen to him—I gather that he will be given sight of himself in some previous incarnation or time or something of that sort, and that it will not be pleasant. Or a change of identity in which punishment shall fit his crimes—you know how these legends go. I am almost ashamed to confess that the old fellow was so convincing that I myself never wore them. I was never 'good,' much less 'wholly good,' and at this stage there is hardly any use lying about that, is there?"—addressed it to Alain Verneil, New Orleans, Louisiana, U. S. A., scrawled across one corner of the package, "Directory Service, Please," and dispatched it.

He put no return address on it, because Verneil would recognize the "Jesse" who had signed the letter. In any case, it did not matter; he was dead before the little package reached New Orleans.

IT CAME into the city on the first day of the annual Mardi Gras, and, being marked for directory service, it was passed along to the proper quarters, where a much-harassed clerk, wishing her day over and her work done—though there were hours yet to pass—received it among other pieces of mail similarly marked. All in good time she came to the package from Cartagena, noticing the stamps first, and thinking of her niece's stamp collection. Being constantly subject to all kinds of script, she had developed some facility in reading the scrawls that passed beneath her eye. But Jesse Brennan's script, while superficially legible, tended toward carelessness, so that his i's were dot-less, and many of his consonants run together, with the result that, shifting her eyes from the stamps to the address she must service, she read it at once: Alan Verneil—and why should she not, when one of Alan Verneil's most spectacular divorce cases had been won that day, and his name was everywhere from the *Globe* to the *Picayune*? And who, but somebody in Colombia, would not know his address? She added it to Brennan's script, and sent the package on its way.

AT THE moment of its arrival, Alan Verneil was at the telephone. Where was the domino he had ordered? He knew it should be in his hands; indeed, it should have awaited him on his return from court, but, though his costume and everything else was in perfect readiness, there was no domino. And none other to be had, admitted his costumer reluctantly. Verneil's first thought, therefore, at the arrival of the package, was that the missing domino had turned up, though it was long since in the hands of a black roisterer, who had found it where it had been lost out of the package from the costumer's.

But sight of the stamps disillusioned him. Nevertheless, he opened it, wondering whom he knew in Cartagena, where he had never been. He looked first at the signature. Perhaps Jesse Melancton, who had gone to South America somewhere after his day in court. The letter puzzled him. He misread its salutation, which, characteristically, Brennan had written so that it might have been Alan, Alain, or Allen; he had no rea-

son to feel that any error had been made. Still, Melanchton was likely to remember the address of his apartment.

He came at last to the spectacles.

Even he could recognize their age—it needed no explanation, such as was in the letter, for the glass in the spectacles was a strange cloudy blue, a kind of smoky blue the like of which he had never seen before; and their frame was evidently hand-wrought, of silver. He put them down on his dressing-table and read the letter once more. A curious thing, certainly. Whoever Jesse was, he was a superstitious man just as certainly.

He brushed the letter and the wrapping of the package to one side, and was about to lay the spectacles away when a thought struck him. He looked at the spectacles once again. They were large, square; they had but a narrow bridge, and were thickly-framed. Awkward thing to wear, no doubt, but in the circumstances, quite proper. They were not out of character, since Verneul was about to join the maskers in the costume of a New Orleans dandy of more than a century ago, and the blue spectacles would do very well indeed in place of the missing domino.

He carried them to a mirror and put them on. He could not have devised a better concealment for his eyes, for he could see through them very well, but none could see his eyes behind them.

There were reasons why he would not like to be known behind his mask. There were irate husbands and equally irate fathers, some of whom had threatened him with various degrees of dire punishment. Moreover, as a divorce lawyer, he entertained many feminine clients, who, if they were not guilty of adultery when they came to him, were guilty at leaving, Verneul having a facility for exacting fees in coin other than money. His success in court bred envy and contempt; his success with the ladies bred hatred and jealousy. But his boldness knew no end, and his self-assurance never faced retreat.

He got dressed, went outside, and took a cab to where the roistering crowds were gay along the streets. There he left the cab and mixed among them: tall saturnine, handsome still young at forty and attractive.

Secure before his roving eyes, he wore the blue spectacles.

HE HAD taken part in the Mardi Gras many times before. It was no novelty to him, and he had not come particularly to enjoy the celebrants or even to watch the parades and the floats; his role was predatory, and his eyes darted hither and yon in search of likely women who might be unable to resist his charms. He walked leisurely about; now that he was in the midst of the celebrants, he had ample time at his disposal, and there was no need to hasten. There were hours yet before he need make his choice among the masked women who danced all around him.

He had not gone far, however, before he reflected that he had never seen the crowds quite so riotous and gay, and, thinking thus, he chanced to look up to see where he was. After a moment of puzzled gazing, here and there, he had to admit to himself that he did not know; somehow, he had wandered into a section of the city completely strange to him, despite certain similarities in old gables and corners. Observing this, he stood quite still and scrutinized his surroundings with his practiced legal eye. During the interval of his examination, he saw surprising things abounding.

There were no street-lamps of any kind.

There was no modern vehicle in sight for as far as he could see, even such floats as were there being horse-drawn.

The hour being close to twilight, many of the roisterers carried crude, homemade torches, while others carried lanterns of a decidedly old-fashioned kind.

He noticed these facts with mounting amazement, but he had no time to speculate on them, for at the moment he felt the tap of a fan on his shoulder, and, turning, found himself looking into the eyes of a strikingly beautiful girl, momentarily raising her mask so that he might see her.

"I've been looking for you," she said, mysteriously.

"Have you?" he answered for lack of anything else to say.

"You're late."

"I came as soon as I could," he answered, determined to play her game.

How beautiful she was. Creole, he

thought—certainly of mixed blood somewhere in her background. With black eyes like something alive and fathomless as a distant sea, soft, velvety skin, long, slender hands. Even in the ruffled and bustled costume she wore it was possible to recognize that her figure was superb. He forgot about the strangeness of the street on which they stood.

"Come," she said, and began to move swiftly away from him, darting in and out among the crowds.

His pulse quickened. "Wait for me," he called after her.

She turned her head briefly, and went on.

He started forward, determined to catch her. The old excitement of the chase filled him, and his only goal now was the pursuit, after which the conquest would surely be his. He did not stop to think who she might be; he had not recognized her face. He knew only that she was beautiful, far more than ordinarily so, that there was something haunting about her eyes and her mouth, that vaguely, deep, deep in his mind, there was a familiar echo, as if somehow, in a far past time, he had known the enchantment of loving a woman like her.

She wove in and out, fleetingly, light and graceful.

But try as he might, somehow he could not catch up to her. She remained always just in sight, and once or twice she paused, mockingly, as if to wait for him; but always she was gone, just as he came within easy speaking distance. He smiled, and his smile held.

In one way or another, in and out of Mardi Gras, he had done this a great many times—and almost always he had emerged the victor. There was no reason why he should not add this vixen to his list of conquests.

He redoubled his efforts.

Gradually, almost imperceptibly, the crowd thinned and was gone. They were alone in a side street, just the two of them, with her white dress six or seven doors ahead of him, and her mocking laughter drifting back in the warm air. Night had fallen, and no lights shone, but it did not matter; like a will-o-wisp she remained always just so far ahead of him, lighter and fleet on her feet than he, and more sure

of herself in the darkness, for once or twice he stumbled and almost fell.

He had no idea where he was; he did not care. His one thought was to catch up to the woman ahead of him; to find his way back would be a matter of moments, once the conquest had been accomplished.

QUITE suddenly she paused. She waited until he was almost up to her; then she turned into a dark, bush-girt lawn, running swiftly to a wide verandah, up the steps to a door, and into the house that stood there. She left the door standing ajar, which was a patent invitation.

He followed.

Inside, despite the darkness, he saw her vanishing into a dimly-lit room.

There, too, he followed.

Instantly, it seemed, the room was alight. The door was shut behind him; his quarry was over across the room. Before him and all around, even at his back, between him and the door, there were men—all in costume, the costume of pirates, clearly. But none was masked; and the domino was gone from the face of his quarry, also, as well as the smile.

For a moment the tableau held. Everyone looked at him with grim tenseness, as at an intruder whose intrusion must be punished.

He felt a brief, thin pricking of fear, but, of course, it was Mardi Gras, and people would understand. Or would they? There was something ominous in the tense quiet of the room.

He looked quickly around, his eyes searching for a familiar face. He saw none.

The tableau broke.

The circle closed around him, save for one arc directly before him, in the center of which sat a roughly dandified man wearing a smart black beard and mustache. He was toying with a short-barrelled pistol of some ancient manufacture. He gazed at Verneul with a mixture of indifference and contempt, which did not conceal his grimness.

"M. Verneul," he said, rather than asked.

"I am known," said Verneul, with a faint smile.

"Speak when you are spoken to," said his host curtly.

Verneul bridled. "Look here. I admit

to entering the house, at the indirect invitation of the young lady, but. . . ."

"M. Verneul has entered houses after young ladies before this, I think," drawled the seated gentleman. "And forced his attentions with and without permission upon a good many of those young ladies." He nodded toward someone standing at his side. "Will you read the charges, Mr. Ariman?"

"Whom have I the honor of addressing?" asked Verneul peremptorily.

There was a ripple of laughter. The seated gentleman rose and made a mocking bow. "Pray forgive me, sir," he said with an edge of unmistakable contempt in his voice. "I am Jean Lafitte, at your service."

His acting, thought Verneul, was startlingly real. "I am sure you will excuse me, gentlemen," he said. "But it is Mardi Gras and. . . ."

"Hold your tongue," said Lafitte, and waved a hand to Ariman. "Read."

"On the sixth of February of last year, he accomplished the seduction of Claire Pechon, sixteen, against her will," read Ariman in a clear voice. "On the second of March, Mlle. Julie Argenton, with child by him, took her own life by drowning. On the eighteenth of April, he seduced Mme. Therese Munon, wife of Leon, who, discovering himself a cuckold, shot his wife and then himself. On the tenth of May, he deflowered Janise Bourgereau, seventeen."

VERNEUL wanted to shout his denial of the ridiculous account, but there was something puzzling, something shockingly confusing inside him. For, though he knew none of the women whose names were being read out with such solemnity, it was undeniable that as each name was read, there rose from some unknown depth of memory the picture of a woman's face, successively—of a sixteen year old girl, and one slightly older, of a married woman, of another girl—pictures which, in some remote corner of his mind, were recognizable. Words struggled to his lips, but they were not of denial.

"The prosecutor has forgotten the year of his charge," he said, as if by rote.

"Since this is 1811, the year must be 1810," said Lafitte. "You are more particu-

lar in this than ever you were about your victims, M. Verneul."

The confusion inside him increased to chaos. Was there two of him, then, that he could remember things which he knew had never taken place? And what was this of 1810 and 1811 now in this twentieth century?

"M. Verneul does not seem to understand that he is standing trial," said Lafitte.

"Trial?" echoed Verneul. "Gentlemen, I am in a fog. . . ."

"Indeed, indeed," murmured Lafitte. "A good ladies' man was never a good swordsman, and quicker to know fear than most men. You shall have justice, do not be alarmed. What have you to say in your defense?"

No words came. There were words deep inside him somewhere, but they could not find an outlet.

"Come, say—is it true that you have seduced young girls?"

He could not answer.

Lafitte turned to Ariman. "Put down that the prisoner has admitted it." And to Verneul once more. "And that you have persuaded silly married women to adultery?"

No answer.

"Once more, he assents. And now, M. Verneul, is it not true also that on the seventh day of this very month you attacked and ravaged Elise Gautier, my ward?" Lafitte flung his arm out to indicate the woman who, but so short a time gone by, had been his eagerly-desired quarry.

He wanted to say that he had never seen her before in his life; but he could not be sure. It seemed to him that memory of her lingered, but from what source? He could not say; he did not know. How had he come here? The woman, yes—but how had it happened? Part of him recalled the unlit streets and thought them natural; but part thought them wrong, knew them wrong. What was happening to him? What fantastic conspiracy was this?

Lafitte had stood up. "M. Paul Verneul, will you hear your sentence?"

He wanted to say, "My name is Alan, Alan Paul," but nothing came from his lips; and indeed, at the moment he could not be sure that anything at all came from any tongue or throat; for he had cast down his

eyes, and seen not floor, but long grass, and an edge of stone, as of a stone box of some kind.

"... To be shot," Lafitte was saying. "Now."

Instantly half a dozen of the old-fashioned pistols were leveled at him, cocked and ready.

"Aim," said Lafitte to the widening circle.

VERNEUL stood as if paralyzed. If only he could know! Which was the dream—this or that other? Which was the reality—that distant world in which he was a counselor, or this world of the dandy of New Orleans in 1811? Which, indeed!

"Fire!" said Lafitte.

There was a round of blasts. Briefly, the world of Alan Verneul was a turbulence of strange, smoky blue.

They found him in a long-abandoned cemetery in the outlying country south of New Orleans, though still within the city

limits. Dead. By what means, none could say. There were some half a dozen bluish marks on his flesh, as if bullets had gone into him; but no skin was broken. In the course of the inquiry, it was discovered that Verneul had been seen rushing madly through the Mardi Gras crowds in pursuit of someone no one had been able to see; that he had been observed by a passer-by in the cemetery, standing quite alone, talking and gesticulating so that his observer thought him drunk and went on; that the cemetery stood on the site of an old house once the property of Désiré Gautier; that the house, according to legend, was the scene of the fatal shooting of an ancestor of Verneul's more than a century ago.

When he was found, Verneul still wore the blue spectacles.

Since Alain Verneul was curator of the city museum, he saw and recognized their value. And in good time, he got around to adding them to his collection, thus accomplishing Jesse Brennan's original intention.
