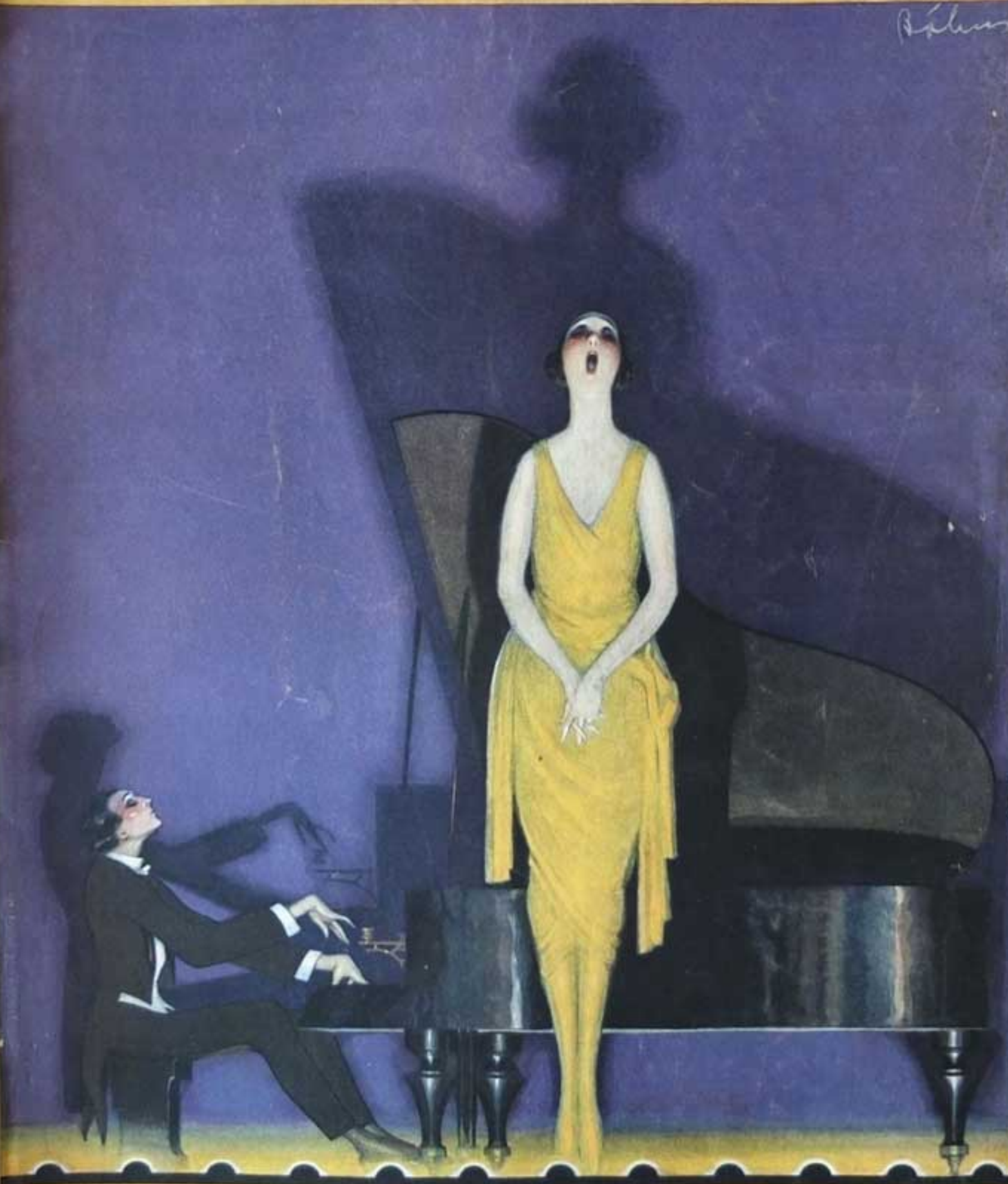


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The Delta of Radegonde

A Tale Out of Poictesme of Holden and His Portrait of the Queen Who Had Never Been

By JAMES BRANCH CABELL

IT was after the followers of the White Stallion had sacked Lacre Kai that young Holden found, among his plunder, the triangular portrait of Elphanor's queen: and for the time young Holden thought little of the picture, he who could not foreknow that its old frame, in shape like the Greek letter Delta, was to bind all his living. But after a few months of peace the lad went to Guivric, then a most promising young thaumaturgist.

"Guivric," says Holden, "the lady in this three-cornered picture is the lady of my love, and you must tell me how I may win her affections."

Guivric looked at the portrait for some while, scratched off a fleck of paint from it with his finger-nail, and answered: "There are impediments to your winning this Queen Radegonde. For one thing, she has been dead for thirteen centuries."

"I admit that thirteen is proverbially an unlucky number, but my all-consuming love is not to be intimidated by such portents."

Guivric thereon consulted the oldest and most authentic poems, and said: "Well, perhaps her being dead such an unlucky number of centuries does not matter, after all, because my authorities appear agreed that love defies time and death. Yet it does matter, I suspect, that the woman in this picture was the notion which a dead artist perpetuated of the Queen Radegonde whom he saw in the flesh."

"So would I see her, Guivric."

The Wisdom of Guivric

"HOLDEN, my meaning is more respectable than your meaning. I mean that if the man laboured as a tradesman executing an order, your cause may prosper: but there is the ugly chance that this radiant, slim, gray-eyed girl was born of the man's brain, very much as, even more anciently, they say, King Jove brought forth a gray-eyed daughter to devastate the world with wisdom; and in that case I fear the worst."

"What, then, is the worst that can happen?"

"Thinking about it too much beforehand," replied Guivric, dryly. Whereon the young mage gave directions which must be followed to the letter if one wished to avoid an indescribable fate. But Holden was cautious, and did follow these instructions to the letter, and when it proved to be the Greek letter Delta he entered it, and so came to his desire, and communicated his love to Queen Radegonde.

Now this Radegonde had been quite alone ever since she was first painted, because the painter had placed no other figure in the quaint triangular tropic garden he painted about her for a background. So to have Holden thus thrusting himself into the vacancy was welcome to Radegonde. And to him her loveliness, and the dearness of her, was greater than he could quite believe in after he had left the Delta, and had returned, in the gray and abject way which Guivric had foretold, to the world of men.

Holden thereafter kept the picture in a secret place, and the years wore on: and stalwart Sir Holden had presently rescued a golden-haired princess from an enchanter, in a large and appalling line of business near Perdigon; and Holden married her, and they got on together very nicely. But times had changed in Poictesme, for Manuel the Redeemer had ridden away to a far place beyond the sunset, and his wife Dame Niaser ruled over-strictly in the tall hero's stead: and to Holden the world was not the place it once had been, and all his pleasuring was to go into the Delta that belonged to Queen Radegonde. The delights of that small tropic garden were joys unknown in the world of men, wherein there are no such women as Radegonde; and therefore the poets have not invented any words to describe these delights, and they must stay untold.

But these delights contented Holden. "Blessed above all men that live am I, in that I am lord of the Delta of Radegonde," said Holden, who could not foreknow his fate.

And it was to Holden an unflinching cordial, thus to steal away from his prosaic workaday life of fighting dragons and ogres, and discomfiting wicked monarchs by guessing their riddles out of hand, and riding about in every kind of weather redressing the afflictions of downtrodden strangers in whom he was not interested, and from the strain of pretending to be wise and admirable in all things for the benefit of his numerous children, and from living among many servitors somewhat lonely. For comeliness and mirth had soon departed from his bright-haired princess wife, through much child-bearing, and presently life too had gone out of her, and her various informal successors proved to be rather stupid once you got to know them. But Radegonde, whom alone Sir Holden loved, and the ever-new endearments of Elphanor's queen, were to the knight an unflinching cordial.

"Blessed above all men that live am I, in that I am lord of the Delta of Radegonde," still said in his gray beard Sir Holden, who could not foreknow his fate.

But as the days went, so went youth, and the appearance of Holden was altering, and Radegonde asked questions about certain noticeable changes. The aging champion explained, as well as he could, the ways of nibbling age and of devouring death, to Elphanor's ageless queen, who knew nothing of these matters, because the painter had put none of them in the triangular garden: and she was troubled when she understood that Holden must be stripped by such marauders of all vigour. Her love for her sole lover, and her horror of being left alone where no other man was ever apt to come thrusting himself into the vacancy, were so great that, with a shedding of resistless tears, the gray-eyed girl persuaded Holden to consult once more with Guivric the Sage, as to in what way Queen Radegonde could be made mortal.

"For then," said she, "we shall abate in vigour together, my dearest, and shall live and die together, and not even after death shall we be separated."

And wise Guivric said that certainly there was a way in which Queen Radegonde might come out of the picture, and assume mortality. But Guivric, shaking his white head, advised against it. "Better, old friend, accept the common lot of men, and be content to see your dreams played with a while and then put by, rather than to see them realized. Besides, you have now many grandchildren, and you owe them an example."

And Holden answered, "Bosh! Do I owe nothing to myself?"

The Queen Descends

SO the high-hearted lovers followed the way of which Guivric had told them. That way is not to be talked about, but blood was shed in the Delta, and the worm that dies not was imprisoned: and after other appalling happenings, Holden the Brave climbed somewhat rheumatically from the canvas, and gave his hand to Radegonde, and she also stepped from the triangular frame, and came into life as the mortal woman that Radegonde had been in the old time.

Straightway she recollected her husband and her children and many of her lovers, and the

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The Delta of Radegonde

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gilded domes of Elphanor's seven proud cities, where now not even a hut was, and all the perfumed wasteful living which Radegonde had known in the old time; and straightway, too, she saw that Holden was a tedious decrepit fellow well past the love of women. And Holden saw that Radegonde was a flighty and rather silly barbarian girl, sufficiently good-looking to be sure, but in no way particularly remarkable. And the two gazed at each other rather forlornly.

The queen began to whimper. "I never," she said, "I never was so lonely in my Delta as I am now."

Old Holden stiffly patted her white shoulder. "Do not give way, my dear. We have acted unwisely, and nobody denies it; but do you come out of this draught, and I will get you some clothes and have you baptized, and then I will present you to our young Count Emmerick, and you can entertain yourself, within Christian limits, by making a fool of him."

"A handsome young count would be better than nothing," the fair girl conceded, brightening, "though I would prefer a crime-hardened sultan or a lecherous emperor, for I am accustomed to inveigling within that degree."

So this presentation was arranged, and tall Emmerick was infatuated the moment he saw the queen's beguiling innocent young face. Forthwith the high Count of Poictesme proclaimed a banquet; and when all were dancing, Holden returned to the void frame, and he looked at the emptied tropic garden, emptied now forever of that radiant and gray-eyed slip of womanhood whom he had loved, and who would gladden his life no more. Guivric came with him; and these two old men kept silence.

"We may deduce that the painter loved her thirteen centuries ago," says Guivric,—"erecting loveliness where there was little to build upon. Thus it is that the brain of man creates women more desirable than may be created by other means; and such women endure. But the women children that have two parents, may endure only a very little

longer than may the scant delights a man can get in gardens that bear bitter fruit or else insipid fruit: for these women have no such Delta as had your Radegonde, no more than has that dispossessed lean ogling flirt of whom young Emmerick will presently be tiring."

Moreover, Guivric said: "The women who are born of man's brain have no flaw in them and no seed of death. There was a Radegonde conceived in Camwy, that walked the glittering pavements of Lacre Kai, and wedded Elphanor, King of Kings, and trusted with many lovers, and later trusted with small worms: but in the artist's brain was conceived another Radegonde, that walks the sun-paths of eternity, and is new-born with every April. Thus it was of old; and this tale is not ended."

And Guivric said also: "The women who are born of man's brain bear to their lovers no issue save dissatisfaction. Their ways are lovely, but contentment does not abide in these ways; and he that follows after the women who are born of man's brain is wounded subtly with wounds that may not ever be quite healed. So let no woman with two parents cosset him, for she toils vainly and in large peril, because it is upon her that he will requite his subtle wounding, just as you, poor Holden, were the destruction of that golden-haired young wife who loved you, and whom you could not love."

Thus said Guivric the Sage; and Holden, a spent man, much hurt but very proud, who now foreknew his fate, replied with resolute smiling: "Blessed above all men that live am I, in that I have been lord of the Delta of Radegonde. I know this, Guivric, as you may not ever know it,—not you, who are as old as I, and who have only wisdom to look back upon. For the rest, there is always in attendance upon everybody a physician that heals all disease. Pending his coming, old friend, I mean to beat you at one more game of chess."

Whereon these aging men fell to such staid diversion as was suited to their remainder of life, while gray-eyed Radegonde danced merrily with her new lover.

Cardinal Gibbons

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ready-made breakfast food; and fish of a dozen hues invited the angle. The very language, "*la ora na, Loti, aroha nui oe*," enchanted me. In a word, I was transported to the South Seas, and Smith and the Cardinal were forgotten. I was in chapter two when I was brought back to Baltimore by Smith's saying:

"Well, what do you want for this truck?"

He held out my huge book. He was cunning, that man. He had permitted me to become netted by that idyl of the tropics before he poured the poison of suggestion into my dull ears.

I looked at Smith stupidly, and he seemed a bad angel—and to be smudging me. But I turned another page, and read a description of the beautiful waterfall of Fautaua. I grew weak, and meanwhile Smith had seen the inscription with the autograph of the new Cardinal. I know now that his little eyes glistened, and that he determined to obtain the dear gift of the prelate to me.

He went to a shelf and returned with two more books, *The Mysterious Island* and *Madam Chrysanthemum*. He handed them to me, and said, "I'll trade

you even—this bum, old thing for these three crackerjacks."

I resisted. I was all but hurling them at him, and the face of the good and venerable Cardinal rose to rebuke me. But I was now gazing at the *Chrysanthemum*, which was laid in Japan. I saw some lovely queer girls in curious clothes, with sweet, slanting eyes.

I closed my mouth firmly, but Smith handed me a half dollar, to boot, and I wheeled and rushed out of the store, with the trio of marvels, and leaving the tempter with the memorable gift.

I have not seen it again, nor did I for long years tell any one of its existence, and I never told the Cardinal.

For the seeing of Japan, for the treading every path that Loti trod in Nagasaki, I waited years, and for the vale of Fautaua, for those bizarre, maddening South Seas, more years. But I did go to them, and I stayed long in them, and I took with me to them the urge and the image evoked by the printed page I had read among the shelves of that unconscious Provoker of Romance, the heartless Smith.

The Cardinal's gift had sped me far. Oh, days of manhood! And, oh! for tales that make adventure real.