The Fortune Teller

Karel Čapek

(A translation by Francis K Johnson of the short story Věštkyně, which was published in Povídky z jedné kapsy in 1929.)

Anyone with half a brain will realise that this incident couldn’t have happened here or in France or Germany. As is well known, here and in those countries judges are required to punish wrong-doers according to the letter of the law rather than according to their ineffable acuity as superior gentlemen. This story involves a judge who made a judgement based not on the relevant sections of law but on his trusty common sense. So, as you will see, it has to do with England or, to be more precise, London, or, to be even more precise, Kensington; or perhaps Brompton or Bayswater – anyway, somewhere thereabouts. The judge was His Honour Judge Kelly and the woman who was the object of his ineffable acuity was Miss Edith Myers.

I should explain that this otherwise respectable lady had aroused the suspicions of Police Inspector McCleary. “My dear,” said McCleary one night to his wife. “I can’t get that Mrs Myers out of my head. I’d love to know how she makes her money. Just imagine: even though it’s winter, she’s still sending her servant to buy asparagus! I’ve also discovered she has about fifteen visitors every day – everything from Covent Garden stall-holders to countesses. And I’m well aware it could all be a front for something else: prostitution, spying or whatever. I need to find out what’s going on.”
“Why don’t you just leave it to me, Bob,” said the redoubtable Mrs McCleary. And so it came to pass that, the very next day, that good lady went to visit Mrs Myers in Bayswater or Marylebone or wherever. Of course she’d taken the precaution of removing her wedding-ring and doing herself up like a young girl – in a mutton-dressed-as-lamb sort of way, I might add. And she pretended to be appropriately nervous as, having rung the bell, she waited to be shown in to Mrs Myers.

“Sit down, my dear child,” said the old lady, after having had a good look at her simpering visitor. “What can I do for you?”

“I…,” spluttered Mrs McCleary. “I… I would like… I’ll be twenty tomorrow and I’d be awfully glad to know what the future holds in store for me.”

“But, Miss… Miss?” asked Mrs Myers, picking up a pack of cards at the same time, and immediately beginning to shuffle them.

“Jones,” said Mrs McCleary, almost in a whisper.

“My dear Miss Jones,” Mrs Myers continued. “I think you’re mistaken. I don’t do card-readings – except, of course, here and there, for old friends, as us old women tend to do. But if you’d like to split the pack into five with your left hand… That’s right… So I do do card readings from time to time, of course, but just for pleasure. Oh look!” she said, as she turned up the first pile. “Diamonds. That means money. And the jack of hearts! That’s a lovely card.”

“Ah,” said Mrs McCleary. “And what next?”

“The jack of diamonds,” said Mrs Myers, as she turned over the second pile. “And the ten of spades. That means travel. But then,” she exclaimed, “we’ve got clubs! Clubs always mean adversity, but here’s the queen of hearts at the end!”

“And what does that mean?” asked Mrs McCleary, trying her hardest to look amazed.

“Diamonds again,” muttered Mrs Myers, turning over the third pile. “My dear child, you’re in for a lot of money. But I’m still not sure whether it’s you who’ll be travelling, or someone close to you.”

“I do have to go and visit my aunt in Southampton,” said Mrs McCleary.

“Oh, it will be further than that,” said Mrs Myers, turning over the fourth pile. “And somebody’s going to try to stop you. An elderly man…”

“Probably my father!” Mrs McCleary exclaimed.

“So there we have it!” said Mrs Myers triumphantly, looking at the upturned fifth pile. “Dear Miss Jones, this is the most beautiful spade I’ve ever seen. Within a year you’ll be married to a fabulously wealthy young man, a millionaire, a businessman – because he travels a lot – but before that you’ll have to overcome difficult obstacles: an elderly gentleman will try to prevent your marriage. So you’ll have to be obstinate. And after you’ve got married you’ll move far away from here, overseas most likely… That will be one guinea, please, for the Christian missions amongst the poor Africans.”

“I’m so grateful to you,” said Mrs McCleary, taking one pound and one shilling from her purse. Very very grateful. But may I ask, Mrs Myers, what it would cost without the adversity?”

“You can’t bribe a fortune-teller,” the old lady said in a tone of injured dignity. “What does your father do, by the way?”

“He works for the police,” lied the young lady, looking as innocent as she could. “He’s a secret agent.”
"Aha!" said the old lady. She pulled three cards out from the pack. "That's bad, very bad. Please tell him, my dear child, that he's in grave danger. He should come to see me to find out more. A lot of Scotland Yard people come and ask me to read the cards for them. And they tell me everything that's worrying them. So, send him to see me. You say he's in the political department? Mr Jones? Tell him I'll be expecting him. Goodbye, my dear Miss Jones... Next please!"

“I don’t like the sound of it,” Mr McCleary said, rubbing the back of his head. “Not at all, Katy. That woman was far too interested in your late father. And apart from that her name isn’t Myers: it’s Meierhof and she’s from Lübeck. A damn German!” he grumbled. “What shall we do about her? I don’t doubt for a moment she’s getting stuff out of people that’s none of her business... I know! I’ll report her to the high-ups.”

And that’s what Mr McCleary did. Somewhat surprisingly the high-ups took it all seriously, and thus it was that Mrs Myers was eventually summoned to appear before His Honour Judge Kelly.

“So, Mrs Myers,” said he, “what’s all this business with the cards?”

“Why do you ask?” said the old lady. “One has to earn one’s keep somehow. At my age I’m hardly going to go and dance in vaudeville!”

“That’s all very well,” said Judge Kelly, “but I’ve had a complaint that you’re not reading the cards properly. And that, my dear Mrs Myers, is just the same as if you were selling bars of clay instead of chocolate. If they’re going to pay a guinea, people are entitled to expect a proper reading. Would you kindly tell me why you’ve set yourself up as a fortune teller when you don’t know how to do it properly?”

“But people don’t complain,” the old lady replied. “The thing is, I tell them things they like to hear. And the pleasure they get from that is surely worth a few shillings. And sometimes I even get it right. Just the other day a lady said to me, ‘No-one has ever read the cards and given me such good advice as you, Mrs Myers!’ She lives in St John’s Wood and is getting a divorce from her husband...”

“But,” said His Honour, “here we have a witness to what you’ve been getting up to. Please tell us about it, Mrs McCleary.”

“Mrs Myers read the cards for me,” said Mrs McCleary. “She told me that within a year I’d be married, that my husband would be a wealthy young man and that we’d move overseas...”

“Why overseas, exactly?” asked the judge.

“Because there was a ten of spades in the second pile, and that means travel,” said Mrs Myers.

“Nonsense!” said the judge. “The ten of spades means good fortune. It’s the jack of spades that means travel; when it comes together with the seven of diamonds, that’s when it means travel to far-away places and good fortune. You can’t pull the wool over my eyes, Mrs Myers! And you told our witness here that within the year she’d marry a wealthy young man. But Mrs McCleary is already married; she married Police Inspector McCleary three years ago, and a fine man he is too. So how do you explain this nonsense, Mrs Myers?”

“Well now,” said the old lady, perfectly calmly. “That’s how it goes sometimes. This person came to me all dolled up like a silly girl. But I noticed
that her left glove was torn. So, someone who’s not rolling in money, but wants to give the appearance that she is. And she told me she was twenty, whereas in fact she’s twenty-five…”

“Twenty-four!” interrupted Mrs McCleary forcefully.

“Well, it’s all the same. So she’d like to get married – that’s to say, she made out she was single. So I foresaw a wedding for her and a rich bridegroom. That’s what seemed to me the most appropriate.”

“And what about the adversity?” demanded Mrs McCleary. “The elderly gentleman and the journey abroad?”

“Forty something more to say,” was Mrs Myers’ simple reply. “For a guinea you have to say more than just a couple of things.”

“I’ve heard all I need to hear,” said the judge. “There’s no getting out of it, Mrs Myers: reading the cards like that is a swindle. Fortune tellers have to understand the cards. It’s true there are various theories about it, but the ten of spades never – and I emphasise the word ‘never’ – means a journey. You will pay a fine of fifty pounds, just like tradespeople who wrongly describe their wares. There’s also a suspicion that you’re a spy, Mrs Myers, but you’re hardly going to own up to that, are you?”

“As God is my witness…,” Mrs Myers began, but His Honour interrupted her. “Never mind: we’ll leave that to one side. But, because you’re a foreigner without proper employment, I shall order the police authorities to expel you from this country. Goodbye, Mrs Myers, and thank you, Mrs McCleary. Fraudulent fortune telling is cynical and dishonest behaviour, Mrs Myers. I hope you’ll learn your lesson.”

About a year later, Judge Kelly happened to meet Police Superintendent McCleary. “Lovely weather we’re having,” said His Honour. “By the way, how’s Mrs McCleary?”

Mr McCleary grimaced. “Well… the thing is, Mr Kelly,” he said, clearly embarrassed, “Mrs McCleary… the thing is… we got divorced.”

“No! Really?” said the judge. “Such an attractive young woman.”

“That was just the problem,” muttered Mr McCleary. “A young dandy took a shine to her. Some sort of millionaire businessman from Melbourne… Of course, I tried to talk sense into her, but…” He waved his hand. “They left for Australia last week.”

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