

Sheik to Sheik: You'll Not Get Far with Stella Dallas on Your Tail

by Jim Cox

The most frequently recalled sequence of the daytime sudser *Stella Dallas* is worth reprising, if not for the typical pathos and challenging circumstances of its beleaguered heroine, then for its humor. Back in the day legions of American housewives tuned in regularly. On weekday afternoons, while delivering the afternoon newspaper in my town, I went from house to house and heard not only the familiar strains of the narrative's theme *How Can I Leave Thee?* but also much of the storyline. Particularly in summer those stay-at-home moms sat in swings on covered porches with their living room windows open and a radio in the window. No air-conditioning then, of course, as they—and I—followed the fascinating tale of a journey to the third world.

Stella had gotten herself involved with Arabian chiefs—the real kind from some nameless nation. What happens when one of those salacious sheiks takes your precious Lolly-Baby—out for a stroll on the desert—to his harem? (Lolly-Baby, aka Laurel—Stella's married daughter—was Stella's whole reason for living.) The answer to the question is: you go after him with a vengeance and use everything at your disposal. Actually, most listeners soon figured out that the offender Stella was tracking was little more than a wolf in sheik's clothing.

Arabian Sheik Ahmead Ben Akbar—who controlled an unidentified Middle Eastern empire—was a very good sheik. He ruled fairly and was evidently admired by his subjects. But the sheik had a twin brother, Sheik Rahshed, who

plotted to overthrow his sibling and take home rule. Impersonating his bro, Rahshed launched his quest by stealing a precious artifact, an Egyptian mummy, from the home of well-heeled Mrs. Grosvenor, Lolly-Baby's mother-in-law. She intended to impress some uppercrusts with it by having the curio on display at a bash in her mansion. When the mummy was filched, nevertheless, Mrs. G. pinned its loss on Stella Dallas (whom she considered beneath her), suggesting that she had taken it to embarrass the dowager before her sophisticated cronies. What neither party realized was that Stella's old chum Ed Munn—blackmailed by the dirty sheik—had pilfered the relic on behalf of the impostor. Are you with me?

Lolly-Baby and Stella reviewed their options after it appeared Mrs. G. would press charges that could send Stella to the slammer. Laurel, who invariably referred to her doting mama as “Mummy,” injected this engaging, although confusing, bit of fluff into the dialogue: “Mummy, anybody who knows you knows you could never steal an Egyptian mummy!” That idiom would be puzzling to nearly everybody soon enough when—while trying to clear Stella's name—Lolly-Baby made a jaunt to the Middle East to regain the stolen mummy.

While there she met her match with Rahshed the lecherous, became a part of his harem and, as a result, watched him incur the wrath of Stella Dallas. In hot pursuit of both offspring and artifact, Stella saved a lot of folks from a train wreck while en-route to Rahshed's native province. Her trek included a submarine cruise through the Suez Canal. Crossing the Sahara, she braved sandstorms and survived non-passionate attacks by bands of desert nomads as she lit off on a camel (not the smoking kind).

Finally tracking the unscrupulous Rahshed to his seraglio, Stella learned that Lolly-Baby had held her captor at bay for three solid weeks while the real mummy (Stella) sought his lair. Stella absconded with both Lolly-Baby and the mummy *and* restored the rightful Sheik Ahmead to his throne. Was she Supermom or not? On the following day's broadcast, Stella opened the dialogue with the exclamation: "Golly, Minnie, it sure is good to be back in Boston." It took her a while to navigate the Suez and cross the desert, but her return to Minnie Grady's rooming house was faster than a speeding bullet.

This whole nonsensical fragment provided the serial's sponsors with a glorious opening for introducing a premium offer tied to the plot's development. An "exact copy" of a necklace worn by Egypt's Queen Sit-Hat-Nor-U-Net could be any listener's prized possession for just two bits. But as the premium was about to be announced on the air, the tiny plant that contracted to make the trinkets temporarily shut down.

In the three weeks that Laurel held the impostor at bay, a writer was left holding the bag. The scribe strung out the dialogue in measured terms without mention of the queen's precious bauble while awaiting the opportune moment to present it. If the dialogue had proceeded at the usual pace, the sequence would have ended with Stella returning to Boston long before the costume jewelry rolled off the assembly line. When its manufacture finally got under way, Stella tore into the harem, the narrator offered the charm for a quarter, and the perspiring writer resigned from the show. It wasn't the radio premium's finest hour.

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