

THE WAY TO MECCA

The ex-Khedive of a certain North African country had money problems—he had so much that he did not know what to do with it. He cared for his wife, their four children and his mistress in a manner befitting royalty. A *bon vivant*, he was a corpulent and jovial character, well into his seventies in 1939, the time of this story. His latest flame was the 18-year-old Yvonne. Court etiquette required that she be hidden, unknown, discreetly kept. A short time later, the Khedive purchased an estate about 90 miles south of Paris, complete with a 200-year-old manor. Yvonne adapted quickly and effectively to her new role as mistress of Ransonville and helped the Khedive spend money.

Since this is a true story, I have changed the names of some people and places. However, it is a fact that my atelier at the time was at 88 Rue de Charonne in Paris and that my office was a cubbyhole with a desk, three chairs and a filing cabinet. From there I did not see my two visitors alight from a Rolls-Royce. One of them, who introduced himself as Monsieur Boubli, asked whether I would care to do some woodfinishing—removing old paint in a stairwell to expose the natural wood. My affirmative answer was followed by a request for samples. My two visitors then had a conference of which I could understand not a single word, but eventually Boubli pointed to one of the finishes and said: "This is the one his highness would like you to produce."

Soon after, my crew and I started the job at Ransonville. In less than two months, the job was brought to a beautiful conclusion. The Khedive visited the worksite frequently, and many nights we shared a bottle of good wine with him. By the time I presented my bill, I was no longer Monsieur Frank, I was "my friend, George."

"My friend, George," said the Khedive, "I am enchanted with your work, but I have a favor to ask you. I invited some friends here for the month of Ramadan and they will be here in three weeks. Would you please do the same kind of work on the six paneled rooms of the manor?"

"Your highness," answered I with a question, "to do the stairwell took us nearly two months. How can I do six times as much work in three weeks?"

"I'll help you," said the Khedive. "I can rub the wood as well as your men can." There was only one possible answer. "The job will be done," I said.

Before I describe the operations that followed, I must go back about three months to when Boubli gave the contract to refinish the six paneled rooms to one of the leading interior decorators of Paris. He had about 20 men working on the job, not far from my four, busy in the stairwell. There was a great deal of teasing going all the time and some professional jealousy. My men even changed the labels on all our containers: the lime-water became angelmilk, the lye, laxative, and so on. The decorator's men finished first, almost a week ahead

of us. The Khedive paid his well-padded bill without batting an eyelash and then asked me to redo the job.

The wood in the stairwell was silvery grey, much like hemp rope, and the shine, or rather the gleam, of it was the dry shine that I developed using emulsified waxes (see box below). We left some of the old paint in the corners here and there, but except for that all the markings of the wood were readable and well emphasized. Not so with the panelings. Their color was a nondescript yellowish brown, with far too much old paint left in the corners. The shine was the greasy glow of fresh beeswax, with which the work was overloaded. While the wood was fairly clean, it had no character.

By the next morning, four more men had arrived from my Paris shop with unusual equipment such as fisherman's hip-boots, swim trunks and scores of brushes, half of them made of wire. Some of the men started to take the panelings from the walls, carefully marking every piece for easy replacement. Others lowered the water level in the brand-new swimming pool to about 2 ft., and I dumped in about 5 lb. of caustic soda (sodium hydroxide). The paneling was lowered unceremoniously into the pool, where the potent solution of caustic soda and my hipbooted men wielding wire brushes made short work of the finish on the wood. Removed from the pool, the panels oozed ugly brown juice, the sap, coming from the guts of the wood.

Men in swim trunks handled the next operation, washing the wood until the water ran clear. More than once the

Emulsified wax

I had sought, for many years, to find out how to impart to wood a hard, dry shine such as could be found on objects waxed centuries ago. I made up my mind that the key was emulsifying wax in water. This, however, was not so simple, and from professional chemists I had to learn the techniques. Hundreds of experiments later I arrived at the formula I give you now. It is the best, and the one I have always used.

In a nonmetallic container (enamel-coated is okay) heat a little over 3¾ liters of water (rain water is best). When it boils, add to it a little over 30 grams of triethanolamine, available from chemical supply houses. In another container, melt a little over 120 grams each of carnauba and candelilla waxes—I prefer the unrefined version of both, if available—plus about 190 grams of stearic acid. When melted, slowly add the wax mixture to the hot water. Let it cool, stirring frequently with a wooden stick. When cool, the waxes are emulsified, and will have the consistency of heavy cream. The color will be a pale green-grey-beige.

As I have said, this is the best formula that I know. But am I satisfied with my water-wax? The answer is no. I am far closer to the shine I am seeking, but I would be a liar if I said I was satisfied. The water-wax is far from being perfect. This is but one of the hundreds of woodfinishing problems that is open to research.

—G.F.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Contributing editor George Frank's book on woodfinishing, from which this tale is excerpted, will be published in the spring of 1981 by The Taunton Press.

Khedive and Yvonne joined the team. Helpers from the village wiped off the excess water and laid the panels on top of small brick piles, exposing the paneling to the sun (back first, face last). After drying, the panels were ready for the next step, the feeding with angel milk—quicklime, freshly slaked in water. We painted this solution on the panels without much care because after drying we brushed and wiped off all the lime we could. A fine dusting of lime remained in the wood, however, accentuating its silvery-grey color. We did not use a single piece of sandpaper, yet from the scrubbing and brushing the wood was pleasantly smooth and had the beginning of a glow.

The second day was not yet over when the first panels began their trek back to their original positions. On the eighth day, the swimming pool was drained, cleaned and restored by a caretaker. My men shed their hipboots, donned overalls and entered the manor, where the first room was ready for them. Their immediate task was to repair the damage caused by the work done so far. A number of splits had developed and we glued wedges in them, but not before rubbing their edges with strong tobacco juice or with liquid nightmare, vinegar in which we had soaked all sorts of rusty iron objects. We did this to underline discreetly the fact that repairs had been made—we wanted the repairs to be visible. We used aged wood for wedges, and the fine brown or grey lines around them added credibility to their age. My carpenters used as few nails as possible to reinstall the panels, hiding most of them under the crown molding, the base or the chair-rail. The brads used to secure these were countersunk immediately and the holes filled with soft bread, moistened with saliva and tinted with powdered rottenstone. In two rooms we could not avoid visible nails, so I devised a tricky way to camouflage them. The frames of these panelings were held together with mortise-and-tenon joints, pegged at each corner with two wooden pegs. No one ever noticed that when we finished the job there was a third peg at each corner, a fake that just covered the countersunk nail.

At this point the paneling had a silvery hemp-like color but the general harmony was missing. The wood had not been selected to be exposed, and some boards contrasted sharply with others. To lighten the dark ones, we used a saturated solution of oxalic acid dissolved in alcohol (kept away from any contact with metal). On some pieces we had to repeat this process two or three times. After bleaching, we washed off the residue with vinegar, then with ammonia water. Boards that were too light had to be dyed with various strengths of "liquid nightmare," which added to the anemic boards a greyish hue.

I made up vast supplies of my emulsified wax, and we applied two thin coats of it to the panelings. After it dried, we shined up the first coat with stiff scrub brushes. We rubbed, or burnished, the second coat with chain cloth that originally came from medieval armor. By now the wood was silky smooth with full emphasized markings and a natural shine. Yet the job was not done. My wax had another quality. In a few days it lost its luster and settled down to a low, matte texture. Now my "stone wax" entered the picture. Unrefined carnauba wax looks like green-grey rock and is quite dull until it is rubbed, but then it acquires the most pleasant hard shine. I broke this wax into small pebbles, melted it over high heat in a double-boiler and then, away from all fire hazards, I poured lacquer thinner over it. In a short time the wax gelled

and became pastelike. With this wax, which dried to stone-hardness under my fingers, I coated the high points of the moldings, carvings and parts of the woodwork that were exposed to wear. A final buffing, this time with wool, helped us to achieve the finish that I consider the ultimate for this kind of work. The Khedive agreed and confirmed it in a letter that is still part of my treasured memorabilia.

The last day on the job was reserved for cleanup and for touchups. With a tray in my hand filled with stains and brushes, I strolled from room to room and found and corrected faults. One of the rooms was the Khedive's bedroom, furnished with austere simplicity: a huge bed, a few chairs and a single night-table. I walked in the room, stepped on a screwdriver left there by some careless workman, lost my balance and fell. The tray slipped out of my hand and the contents of one of my small jars spilled on the carpet, which was of a quality royalty can afford, woodfinisher never. My foreman, Richard, and I locked ourselves in the room and tried to clean up the spot. Two hours later we had to throw in the sponge: The spot remained. Then Richard had an idea: "Let's turn the bed around, and tell Boubli later about the accident." No sooner said than done.

The guests of the Khedive arrived the next day, and the reception dinner was scheduled for 6:00 P.M. Well before that time, I had received a message that the Khedive wanted me to "honor the reception with my presence." Sensing that a simple woodfinisher did not belong in the company of statesmen and political leaders, I tried to excuse myself, but Boubli, the Khedive's secretary, made it clear that the Khedive would resent my absence. Therefore, shortly after 5:00 P.M., I arrived at the manor in a hastily rented tuxedo, and was promptly put at ease by Yvonne and the Khedive. A few aperitifs helped to narrow the gap between diplomats and woodfinisher, and by the time the couscous was served I no longer felt that I was an intruder.

After cognac and cigars, the Khedive took the guests on a tour of the manor. Politely he asked my permission to use his native language and I guess that they spoke about the paintings, furniture and rugs, which represented a small fortune. When the group reached the first paneled room, they looked at and stroked the wood, then looked at me with warmth. As new rooms opened up, the "oohs and ahs" of this appreciative audience increased. Finally, we entered the Khedive's bedroom. The bed was back in its original position, the spot was in full evidence, and my heart felt as if it had stopped beating. This time the Khedive spoke in French, addressing me directly: "George, my friend, under your magic fingers this lifeless wood has become a thing of beauty, like music or poetry. While performing your magic act, by accident you soiled my carpet. My intention is to keep that spot as it is, right where it is, to remind me of my indebtedness to you, who revealed to me the beauty that can be found in a piece of simple wood." The Khedive took me in his arms and kissed both of my cheeks. I had tears in my eyes and could not utter a single word. Then the Khedive spoke again, laughingly, pointing to the bed: "And remember, my friend, that a true believer can sleep only so that the line between his heart and his head points toward Mecca." □

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