

The Luminous Shield

By Helena P. Blavatsky

We were a small and select party of light-hearted travellers. We had arrived at Constantinople a week before from Greece, and had devoted fourteen hours a day ever since to toiling up and down the steep heights of Pera, visiting bazaars, climbing to the tops of minarets and fighting our way through armies of hungry dogs, the traditional masters of the streets of Stamboul. Nomadic life is infectious, they say, and no civilization is strong enough to destroy the charm of unrestrained freedom when it has once been tasted. The gipsy cannot be tempted from his tent, and even the common tramp finds a fascination in his comfortless and precarious existence, that prevents him taking to any fixed abode and occupation. To guard my spaniel Ralph from falling a victim to this infection, and joining the canine Bedouins that infested the streets, was my chief care during our stay in Constantinople. He was a fine fellow, my constant companion and cherished friend. Afraid of losing him, I kept a strict watch over his movements; for the first three days, however, he behaved like a tolerably well-educated quadruped, and remained faithfully at my heels. At every impudent attack from his Mahomedan cousins, whether intended as a hostile demonstration or an overture of friendship, his only reply would be to draw in his tail between his legs, and with an air of dignified modesty seek protection under the wing of one or other of our party.

As he had thus from the first shown so decided an aversion to bad company, I began to feel assured of his discretion, and by the end of the third day I had considerably relaxed my vigilance. This carelessness on in part, however, was soon punished, and I was made to regret my misplaced confidence. In an unguarded moment he listened to the voice of some four-footed syren, and the last I saw of him was the end of his bushy tail, vanishing round the corner of a dirty, winding little back street.

Greatly annoyed, I passed the remainder of the day in a vain search after my dumb companion. I offered twenty, thirty, forty francs reward for him. About as many vagabond Maltese began a regular chase and towards evening we were invaded in our hotel by the whole troop, every man of them with a more or less mangy cur in his arms, which he tried to persuade me was my lost dog. The more I denied, the more solemnly they insisted, one of them actually going down on his knees, snatching from his bosom an old corroded metal image of the Virgin, and swearing a solemn oath that the Queen of Heaven herself had kindly appeared to him to point out the right animal. The tumult had increased to such an extent that it looked as if Ralph's disappearance was going to be the cause of a small riot, and finally our landlord had to send for a couple of Kavasses from the nearest police station, and have this regiment of bipeds and quadrupeds expelled by main force. I began to be convinced that I should never see my dog again, and I was the more despondent since the porter of the hotel, a semi-respectable old brigand, who, to judge by appearances, had not passed more than half-a-dozen years at the galleys, gravely assured me that all my pains were useless, as my spaniel was undoubtedly dead and devoured too by this time, the Turkish dogs being very fond of their more toothsome English brothers.

All this discussion had taken place in the street at the door of the hotel, and I was about to give up the search for that night at least, and enter the hotel, when an old Greek lady, a Phanariote who had been hearing the fracas from the steps of a door close by, approached our disconsolate

group and suggested to Miss H—, one of our party, that we should enquire of the dervishes concerning the fate of Ralph.

“And what can the dervishes know about my dog?” said I, in no mood to joke, ridiculous as the proposition appeared.

“The holy men know all, Kyrea (Madam),” said she, somewhat mysteriously. “Last week I was robbed of my new satin pelisse, that my son had just brought me from Broussa, and, as you all see, I have recovered it and have it on my back now.”

“Indeed? Then the holy men have also managed to metamorphose your new pelisse into an old one by all appearances,” said one of the gentlemen who accompanied us, pointing as he spoke to a large rent in the back, which had been clumsily repaired with pins.

“And that is just the most wonderful part of the whole Story,” quietly answered the Phanariote, not in the least disconcerted. “They showed me in the shining circle the quarter of the town, the house, and even the room in which the Jew who had stolen my pelisse was just about to rip it up and cut it into pieces. My son and I had barely time to run over to the Kalindjikoulosek quarter, and to save my property. We caught the thief in the very act, and we both recognized him as the man shown to us by the dervishes in the magic moon. He confessed the theft and is now in prison.”

Although none of us had the least comprehension of “what she meant by the magic moon and the shining circle, and were all thoroughly mystified by her account of the divining powers of the “holy men,” we still felt somehow satisfied from her manner that the story was not altogether a fabrication, and since she had at all events apparently succeeded in recovering her property through being somehow assisted by the dervishes, we determined to go the following morning and see for ourselves, for what had helped her might help us likewise.

The monotonous cry of the Muezzins from the tops of the minarets had just proclaimed the hour of noon as we, descending from the heights of Pera to the port of Galata, with difficulty managed to elbow our way through the unsavoury crowds of the commercial quarter of the town. Before we reached the docks we had been half deafened by the shouts amid incessant ear-piercing cries and the Babel-like confusion of tongues. In this part of the city it is useless to expect to be guided by either house numbers, or names of streets. The location of any desired place is indicated by its proximity to some other more conspicuous building, such as a mosque, bath or European shop; for the rest, one has to trust to Allah and his prophet.

It was with the greatest difficulty, therefore, that we finally discovered the British ship-chandler’s store, at the rear of which we were to find the place of our destination. Our hotel guide was as ignorant of the dervishes’ abode as we were ourselves; but at last a small Greek, in the simplicity of primitive undress, consented for a modest copper backsheesh to lead us to the dancers.

When we arrived we were shown into a vast and gloomy hall that looked like a deserted stable. It was long and narrow, the floor was thickly strewn with sand as in a riding school, and it was lighted only by small windows placed at some height from the ground. The dervishes had finished their morning performances, and were evidently resting from their exhausting labours. They looked completely prostrated, some lying about in corners, others sitting on their heels staring vacantly into space, engaged, as we were informed, in meditation on their invisible deity. They appeared to have lost all power of sight and hearing, for none of them responded to our questions until a great gaunt figure, wearing a tall cap that made him look at least seven feet high, emerged from an obscure corner. Informing us that he was their chief, the giant gave us to understand that the saintly brethren, being in the habit of receiving orders for additional

ceremonies from Allah himself, must on no account be disturbed. But when our interpreter had explained to him the object of our visit, which concerned himself alone, as he was the sole custodian of the “divining rod,” his objections vanished and he extended his hand for alms. Upon being gratified, he intimated that only two of our party could be admitted at one time into the confidence of the future, and led the way, followed by Miss H—and myself.

Plunging after him into what seemed to be a half subterranean passage, we were led to the foot of a tall ladder leading to a chamber under the roof. We scrambled up after our guide, and at the top we found ourselves in a wretched garret of moderate size, with bare walls and destitute of furniture. The floor was carpeted with a thick layer of dust, and cobwebs festooned the walls in neglected confusion. In the corner we saw something that I at first mistook for a bundle of old rags; but the heap presently moved and got on its legs, advanced to the middle of the room and stood before us, the most extraordinary looking creature that I ever beheld. Its sex was female, but whether she was a woman or child it was impossible to decide. She was a hideous-looking dwarf; with an enormous head, the shoulders of a grenadier, with a waist in proportion the whole supported by two short, lean, spider-like legs that seemed unequal to the task of bearing the weight of the monstrous body. She had a grinning countenance like the face of a satyr, and it was ornamented with letters and signs from the Koran painted in bright yellow. On her forehead was a blood-red crescent; her head was crowned with a dusty tarbouche, or fez; her legs were arrayed in large Turkish trousers, and some dirty white muslin wrapped round her body barely sufficed to conceal its hideous deformities. This creature rather let herself drop than sat down in the middle of the floor, and as her weight descended on the rickety boards it sent up a cloud of dust that set us coughing and sneezing. This was the famous Tatmos known as the Damascus oracle!

Without losing time in idle talk, the dervish produced a piece of chalk, and traced around the girl a circle about six feet in diameter. Fetching from behind the door twelve small copper lamps which he filled with some dark liquid from a small bottle which he drew from his bosom, he placed them symmetrically around the magic circle. He then broke a chip of wood from a panel of the half ruined door, which bore the marks of many a similar depredation, and, holding the between his thumb and finger he began blowing on it at regular intervals, alternating the blowing with mutterings of some kind of weird incantation, till suddenly, and without any apparent cause for its ignition, there appeared a spark on the chip and it blazed up like a dry match. The dervish then lit the twelve lamps at this self-generated flame.

During this process, Tatmos, who had sat till then altogether unconcerned and motionless, removed her yellow slippers from her naked feet, and throwing them into a corner, disclosed as an additional beauty, a sixth toe on each deformed foot. The dervish now reached over into the circle and seizing the dwarf’s ankles gave a jerk, as if he had been lifting a bag of corn, and raised her clear off the ground, then, stepping back a pace, held her head downward. He shook her as one might a sack to pack its contents, the motion being regular and easy. He then swung her to and fro like a pendulum until the necessary momentum was acquired, when letting go one foot, and seizing the other with both hands, he made a powerful muscular effort and whirled her round in the air as if she had been an Indian club.

My companion had shrunk back in alarm to the farthest corner. Round and round the dervish swung his living burden, she remaining perfectly passive. The motion increased in rapidity until the eye could hardly follow the body in its circuit. This continued for perhaps two or three minutes, until, gradually slackening the motion, he at length stopped it altogether, and in an instant had landed the girl on her knees in the middle of the lamp-lit circle. Such was the Eastern mode of mesmerization as practised among the dervishes.

And now the dwarf seemed entirely oblivious of external objects and in a deep trance.. Her head and jaw dropped on her chest, her eyes were glazed and staring, and altogether her appearance was even more hideous than before. The dervish then carefully closed the shutters of the only window, and we should have been in total obscurity, but that there was a hole bored in it, through which entered a bright ray of sunlight that shot through the darkened room and shone upon the girl. He arranged her drooping head so that the ray should fall upon the crown, after which, motioning us to remain silent, he folded his anus upon his bosom, and, fixing his gaze upon the bright spot, became as motionless as a stone image. I, too, riveted my eyes on the same spot, wondering what was to happen next, and how all this strange ceremony was to help me to find Ralph.

By degrees, the bright patch, as if it had drawn through the sunbeam a greater splendour from without and condensed it within its own area, shaped itself into a brilliant star, sending out rays in every direction as from a focus.

A curious optical effect then occurred: the room, which had been previously partially lighted by the sunbeam, grew darker and darker as the star increased in radiance, until we found ourselves in an Egyptian gloom. The star twinkled, trembled and turned, at first with a slow gyratory motion, then faster and faster, increasing its circumference at every rotation until it formed a brilliant disk, and we no longer saw the dwarf, who seemed absorbed into its light. Having gradually attained an extremely rapid velocity, as the girl had done when whirled by the dervish, the motion began to decrease and finally merged into a feeble vibration, like the shimmer of moonbeams on rippling water. Then it flickered for a moment longer, emitted a few last flashes, and assuming the density and iridescence of an immense opal it remained motionless. The disk now radiated a moon-like lustre, soft and silvery, but instead of illuminating the garret, it seemed only to intensify the darkness. The edge of the circle was not penumbrous, but on the contrary sharply defined like that of a silver shield.

All being now ready, the dervish without uttering a word, or removing his gaze from the disk, stretched out a hand, and taking hold of mine, he drew me to his side and pointed to the luminous shield. Looking at the place indicated, we saw large patches appear like those on the moon. These gradually formed themselves into figures that began moving about in high relief in their natural colours. They neither appeared like a photograph nor an engraving; still less like the reflection of images on a mirror, but as if the disk were a cameo, and they were raised above its surface and then endowed with life and motion. To my astonishment and my friend's consternation, we recognized the bridge leading from Galata to Stamboul spanning the Golden Horn from the new to the old city. There were the people hurrying to and fro, steamers and gay caiques gliding on the blue Bosphorus, the many coloured buildings, villas and palaces reflected in the water; and the whole picture illuminated by the noon-day sun. It passed like a panorama, but so vivid was the impression that we could not tell whether it or ourselves were in motion. All was bustle and life, but not a sound broke the oppressive stillness. It was noiseless as a dream. It was a phantom picture. Street after street and quarter after quarter succeeded one another; there was the bazaar, with its narrow roofed passages, the small shops on either side, the coffee houses with gravely smoking Turks; and as either they glided past us or we past them, one of the smokers upset the narghilé and coffee of another, and a volley of soundless invectives caused us great amusement. So we travelled with the picture until we came to a large building that I recognized as the palace of the Minister of Finance. In a ditch behind the house, and close to a mosque, lying in a pool of mud with his silken coat all bedraggled, lay my poor Ralph! Panting

and crouching down as if exhausted, he seemed to be in a dying condition and near him were gathered some sorry-looking curs who lay blinking in the sun and snapping at the flies!

I had seen all that I desired, although I had not breathed a word about the dog to the dervish, and had come more out of curiosity than with the idea of any success. I was impatient to leave at once and recover Ralph, but as my companion besought me to remain a little while longer, I reluctantly consented. The scene faded away and Miss H—placed herself in turn by the side of the dervish.

“I will think of *him*,” she whispered in my ear with the eager tone that young ladies generally assume when talking of the worshipped *him*.

There is a long stretch of sand and a blue sea with white waves dancing in the sun, and a great steamer is ploughing her way along past a desolate shore, leaving a milky track behind her. The deck is full of life, the men are busy forward, the cook with white cap and apron is coming out of the galley, uniformed officers are moving about, passengers fill the quarter-deck, lounging, flirting or reading, and a young man we both recognize comes forward and leans over the taffrail. It is—*him*.

Miss H gives a little gasp, blushes and smiles, and concentrates her thoughts again. The picture of the steamer vanishes; the magic moon remains for a few moments blank. But new spots appear on its luminous face, we see a library slowly emerging from its depths—a library with green carpet and hangings, and book-shelves round the sides of the room. Seated in an arm-chair at a table under a hanging lamp, is an old gentleman writing. His gray hair is brushed back from his forehead, his face is smooth-shaven and his countenance has an expression of benignity.

The dervish made a hasty motion to enjoin silence; the light on the disk quivers, but resumes its steady brilliance, and again its surface is imageless for a second.

We are back in Constantinople now and out of the pearly depths of the shield forms our own apartment in the hotel. There are our papers and books on the bureau, my friend’s travelling hat in a corner, her ribbons hanging on the glass, and lying on the bed the very dress she had changed when starting out on our expedition. No detail was lacking to make the identification complete; and as if to prove that we were not seeing something conjured up in our own imagination, there lay upon the dressing-table two unopened letters, the handwriting on which was clearly recognized by my friend. They were from a very dear relative of hers, from whom she had expected to hear when in Athens, but had been disappointed. The scene faded away and we now saw her brother’s room with himself lying upon the lounge, and a servant bathing his head, whence, to our horror, blood was trickling. We had left the boy in perfect health but an hour before; and upon seeing this picture my companion uttered a cry of alarm, and seizing me by the hand dragged me to the door. We rejoined our guide and friends in the long hall and hurried back to the hotel.

Young H—had fallen downstairs and cut his forehead rather badly; in our room, on the dressing-table were the two letters which had arrived in our absence. They had been forwarded from Athens. Ordering a carriage, I at once drove to the Ministry of Finance, and alighting with the guide, hurriedly made for the ditch I had seen for the first time in the shining disk! In the middle of the pool, badly mangled, half-famished, but still alive, lay my beautiful spaniel Ralph, and near him were the blinking curs, unconcernedly snapping at the flies.