

The Yashmak of Pearls

By Sax Rohmer

I

The *duhr*, or noonday call to prayer, had just sounded from the minarets of the Mosques of Kalaûn and En-Nasîr, and I was idly noting the negligible effect of the *adan* upon the occupants of the neighboring shops—coppersmiths for the most part—when suddenly my errant attention became arrested.

A mendicant of unwholesome aspect crouched in the shadow of the narrow gateway at the entrance to the Sûk es-Saîgh, or gold and silver bazaar, having his one serviceable eye fixed in a malevolent stare upon something or someone immediately behind me.

It is part and parcel of my difficult profession to subdue all impulses and to think before acting. I sipped my coffee and selected a fresh cigarette from the silver box upon the rug beside me. In this interval I had decided that the one-eyed mendicant cherished in his bosom an implacable and murderous hatred for my genial friend, Ali Mohammed, the dealer in antiques; that he was unaware of my having divined his bloody secret; and that if I would profit by my accidental discovery, I must continue to feign complete ignorance of it.

Turning casually to Au Mohammed, I was startled to observe the expression upon his usually immobile face: he was positively gray, and I thought I detected a faint rattling sound, apparently produced by his teeth; his eyes were set as if by hypnosis upon the uncleanly figure huddled in the shadow of the low gate.

“You arc unwell, my friend,” I said.

All Mohammed shook his head feebly, removed his eyes by a palpable effort from the watcher in the gateway, but almost instantly reverted again to that fixed and terrified scrutiny.

“Not at all, Kernaby Pasha,” he chattered; “not in the least.”

He passed a hand rapidly over a brow wet with perspiration, and moistened his lips, which were correspondingly dry. I determined upon a diplomatic *tour de force*; I looked him squarely in the face.

“For some reason,” I said distinctly, “you arc in deadly fear of the wall-eyed mendicant who is sitting by the gate of the Sûk es-Saîgh, O Ali Mohammed, my friend.”

I turned with assumed carelessness. The beggar of murderous appearance had vanished, and Ali Mohammed was slowly recovering his composure. I knew that I must act quickly, or he would deny with the urbane mendacity of the Egyptian all knowledge of the one-eyed one; therefore—

“Acquaint me with the reason of your apprehensions,” I said, at the same time offering him one of his own cigarettes; “it may be that I can assist you.”

A moment he hesitated, glancing doubtfully in the direction of the gate and back to my face; then—

“It is one of the people of Tir,” he whispered, bending close to my ear; “of the evil *ginn* who arc the creatures of Abû Tabâh.”

I was puzzled and expressed my doubt in words. “Alas,” replied Au Mohammed, “the Imâm Abû Tabâh is neithuer a man nor an official; he is a magician.”

“Indeed! then you speak of one bearing the curious name of Abû Tabâh, who is at once the holder of a holy office and also one who has dealings with the *ginn* and the *Efreets*. This is strange, Ali Mohammed, my friend.”

“It is strange and terrible,” he whispered, “and I fear that my path is beset with pitfalls and slopeth down to desolation.” he pronounced the *Takbîr*, “*Allâhu akbar!*” and uttered the words “*Hadeed! yâ mashûm!*” (Iron! thou unlucky!), a potent invocation, as the *ginn*'s dread of that metal is well known. “There are thing of which one may not speak,” he declared; and this is one of them.”

Sorely puzzled as I was by this most mysterious happening, yet, because of the pious words of my friend, I knew that the incident was closed so far as confidences were concerned; and I presently took my departure, my mind filled with all sorts of odd conjectures by which I sought to explain the matter. I was used to the superstitions of that quarter where almost every gate and every second street has its guardian *ginnee*, but who and what was Abû Tabâh? An Imâm, apparently, though to what mosque attached Ali Mohammed had not mentioned. And why did Ali Mohammed fear Abû Tabâh?

So my thoughts ran, more or less unguided, whilst I made my way through streets narrow and tortuous in the direction of the Rondpoint du Mûski. I saw no more of the wall-eyed mendicant; but in a court hard by the Mosque of el-Ashraf I found myself in the midst of a squabbling crowd of natives surrounding someone whom I gathered, from the direction of their downward glances, to be prone upon the ground. Since the byways of the Sûk el-Attârin are little frequented by Europeans, at midday, I thrust my way into the heart of the throng, thinking that some stray patron of Messrs. Cook and Son (Egypt, Ltd.) might possibly have got into trouble or have been overcome by the heat.

Who or what lay at the heart of that gathering I never learned. I was still some distance from the centre of the disturbance when an evil-smelling sack was whipped over my head and shoulders from behind, a hand clapped upon my mouth and jaws; and, lifted in muscular arms, I found myself being borne inarticulate down stone steps, as I gathered from the sound, into some cool cellar-like place.

II

In my capacity as Egyptian representative of Messrs. Moses, Murphy & Co., of Birmingham, I have sometimes found myself in awkward corners; but in Cairo, whether the native or European quarter, I had hitherto counted myself as safe as in London and safer than in Paris. The unexpectedness of the present outrage would have been sufficient to take my breath away without the agency of the filthy sack, which had apparently contained garlic at some time and now contained my head.

I was deposited upon a stone-paved floor and my wrists were neatly pinioned behind me by one of my captors, whilst another hung on to my ankles. The sack was raised from my body but not from my face; and whilst a hand was kept firmly pressed over the region of my mouth, nimble fingers turned my pockets inside out. I assumed at first that I had fallen into the clutches of some modern brethren of the famous Forty, but when my purse, note-case, pocket-book, and other belongings were returned to me, I realized that something more underlay this attempt than the mere activity of a gang of footpads.

At this conclusion I had just arrived when the stinking sack was pulled off entirely and I found myself sitting on the floor of a small and very dark cellar. Beside me, holding the sack in his

huge hands, stood a pock-marked negro of most repulsive appearance, and before me, his slim, ivory-colored hands crossed and resting upon the head of an ebony cane, was a man, apparently an Egyptian, whose appearance had something so strange about it that the angry words which I had been prepared to utter died upon my tongue and I sat staring mutely into the face of my captor; for I could not doubt that the outrage had been dictated by this man's will.

He was, then, a young man, probably under thirty, with perfectly chiseled features and a slight black moustache. He wore a black *gibbeh*, and a white turban, and brown shoes upon his small feet. His face was that of an ascetic, nor had I ever seen more wonderful and liquid eyes; in them reposed a world of melancholy; yet his red lips were parted in a smile tender as that of a mother. Inclining his head in a gesture of gentle dignity, this man—whom I hated at sight—addressed me in Arabic.

"I am desolated," he said, "and there is no comfort in my heart because of that which has happened to you by my orders. If it is possible for me to recompense you by any means within my power; command and you shall find a slave."

He was poisonously suave. Beneath the placid exterior, beneath the sugar-lipped utterances, in the deeps of the gazelle-like eyes, was hid a cold and remorseless spirit for which the man's silken demeanor was but a cloak. I hated him more and more. But my trade—for I do not blush to own myself a tradesman—has taught me caution. My ankles were free, it is true, but my hands were still tied behind me and over me towered the hideous bulk of the negro. This might be modern Cairo, and no doubt there were British troops quartered at the Citadel and at the Kasr en-Nîl; probably there was a native policeman, a representative of twentieth-century law and order, somewhere in the maze of streets surrounding me: but, in the first place, I was at a physical disadvantage, in the second place I had reasons for not desiring unduly to intrude my affairs upon official notice, and in the third place some hazy idea of what might be behind all this business had begun to creep into my mind.

"Have I the pleasure," I said, and electing to speak, not in Arabic but in English, "of addressing the *Imâm Abûii Tabâh*?"

I could have sworn that despite his amazing self-control the man started slightly; but the lapse, if lapse it were, was but momentary. He repeated the dignified obeisance of the head—and answered me in English as pure as my own.

"I am called Abû Tabâh," he said; "and if I assure you that my discourteous treatment was dictated by a mistaken idea of duty, and if I offer you this explanation as the only apology possible, will you permit me to untie your hands and call an *arabî-yeh* to drive you to your hotel?"

"No apology is necessary," I assured him. "Had I returned direct to Shepheard's I should have arrived too early for luncheon; and the odor of garlic, which informed the sack that your zeal for duty caused to be clapped upon my head, is one for which I have a certain penchant if it does not amount to a passion."

Abû Tabâh smiled, inclined his head again, and slightly raising the ebony cane indicated my pinioned wrists, at the same time glancing at the negro. In a trice I was unbound and once more upon my feet. I looked at the dilapidated door which gave access to the cellar, and I made a rapid mental calculation of the approximate weight in pounds of the large negro; then I looked hard at Abû Tabâh—who smilingly met my glance.

"Any one of my servants," he said urbanely, "who wait in the adjoining room, will order you an *arabîyeh*."

III

When the card of Ali Mohammed was brought to me that evening, my thoughts instantly flew to the wall-eyed mendicant of the Sûk en-Nahasîn, and to Abû Tabâh, the sugar-lipped. I left the pleasant company of the two charming American ladies with whom I had been chatting on the terrace and joined Ali Mohammed in the lounge.

Without undue preamble he poured his tale of woe into my sympathetic ears. He had been lured away from his shop later that afternoon, and, in his absence, someone had ransacked the place from floor to roof. That night on his way to his abode, somewhere out Shiubra direction I understood, he had been attacked and searched, finally to reach his house and to find there a home in wild disorder.

"I fear for my life," he whispered and glanced about the lounge in blackest apprehension; "yet where in all Cairo may I find an intermediary whom I can trust? Suppose," he pursued, and dropped his voice yet lower, "that a commission of ten per cent—say, one hundred pounds, English—were to be earned, should you care, Kernaby Pasha, to earn it?"

I assured him that I should regard such a proposal with the utmost affection.

"It would be necessary," he continued, "for you to disguise yourself as an aged woman and to visit the *harêm* of a certain wealthy Boy. I have a ring which must be shown to the *bowwab* at the gate of the *harêm* gardens upon which you would knock three times slowly and then twice rapidly. You would collect the thousand *ginêh* agreed upon and would deliver to a certain lady a sandalwood box, the possession of which endangers my life and has brought about me the hosts of Abû Tabâh the magician."

So the head of the cat was out of the bag at last. But there was more to come and it was not a proposition to plunge at, as I immediately perceived; and I parted from Ali Mohammed upon the prudent understanding that I should acquaint him with my decision on the morrow.

The terrace of Shepherd's was deserted, when, having escorted my visitor to the door, he made his way down into the Shâria Kâmel Pasha. Two white-robed figures who looked like hotel servants, and a little nondescript group of natives, stood at the foot of the steps. At the instant that doubt entered my mind and too late to warn the worthy Ali Mohammed, the group parted to give him passage; then . . . a terrific scuffle was in progress and one of the wealthiest merchants of the Mûski was being badly hustled.

I ran down the steps, the carriage-despatcher and some other officials, whom the disturbance had aroused from their secret lairs, appearing almost simultaneously. As I reached the street, out from the feet of the wrestling throng, like a football from a scrum, rolled a neat *tarbûsh*.

Automatically I stooped and picked it up. Its weight surprised me. Then, glancing inside the *tarbûsh*, I perceived that a little oblong box, together with a quaint signet ring, were ingeniously attached to the crown by means of silk threads tied around the knot of the tassel. I glanced rapidly about me. I, alone, had seen the cap roll out upon the pavement.

A hard jerk, and I had the box and the ring free in my hand. The tall carriage-despatcher, his ferocious efforts now seconded by a native policeman who freely employed his cane upon the thinly-clad persons of the group, had terminated the scuffle.

Right and left active figures darted, pursued for some little distance by the policeman and the two men from the hotel. There were no captures.

A very dusty and bemused Ali Mohammed, his shaven skull robbing him of much of the dignity which belonged to his *tarbûsh*, confronted me, ruefully dusting his garments.

"Your *tarbûsh*, my friend," I said, restoring his property to him with a bow.

One piercing glance he cast into the interior, then—"O Allah!" he wailed—"O Allah! I am robbed! Yet—"

A sort of martyred resignation, a beatific peace, crept over his features.

"To war against Abû Tabâh is the act of a fool," he declared. "To have obtained the Boy's money would have been good, but to have obtained peace is better!"

IV

I awoke that night from a troubled sleep and from a dream wherein magnetic fingers caressed my forehead hypnotically. For a moment I could not believe that I was truly awake; time long ivory hand of my dreams was still moving close before me with a sort of slow fanning movement—and other, nimble, fingers crept beneath my pillow!

Of my distaste for impulse I have already spoken, and even now, with my mind not wholly under control, I profited by those years of self-imposed discipline. Without fully opening my eyes, cautiously, inch by inch, I moved my hand to that side of the bed nearer to the wall, where there reposed a leather holster containing my pistol.

My fingers closed over the butt of the weapon; and in a flash I became wide awake . . . and had the ring of the barrel within an inch of the smiling face of Abû Tabâh!

I sat up.

"Be good enough, my friend," I said, "to turn on the center lamp. The switch, as you have probably noted, is immediately to the left of the door."

Abû Tabâh, straightening his figure and withdrawing his hand from beneath my pillow, inclined his picturesque head in grave salute and moved stately in the direction indicated. The room was flooded with yellow light. Its disorder was appalling; apparently no item of my gear had escaped attention.

"Pray take a seat," I said; "this one close beside me."

Abû Tabâli gravely accepted the invitation.

"This is the second occasion," I continued, "upon which you have unwarrantably submitted me to a peculiar form of outrage—"

"Not unwarrantably," replied Abû Tabâh, his speech suave and gentle; "but I fear I am too late!"

His words came as a beam of enlightenment. At last I had the game in my hands did I but play my cards with moderate cunning.

"You must pursue your inquiries in the *harêm* of the Bey," I said.

Abû Tabâh shrugged his shoulders.

"The house of Yûssuf Boy has been watched," he replied; "therefore my agents have failed me and must be punished."

"They are guiltless. It was humanly impossible to perceive my entrance to the house," I declared truthfully.

Abû Tahâh smiled into my face.

"So it was *you* who carried time sacred *burko* of the Seyyîdeh Nefîseh," he said; "and to-night Ali Mohammed brought you the reward for your perilous journey."

"Your reasoning is sound," I replied, "and the accuracy of your information remarkable."

I had scored the first point in the game; for I had learned that the wonderful silken *yashmak*, pearl embroidered, which I had found in the sandalwood box, was no less a curiosity than the

face-veil of the Seyyîdeh Nefîseh and must therefore be of truly astounding antiquity and unique of its kind.

“The woman Shâhmarâh,” continued my midnight visitor, the eerie light of fanaticism dawning in his eyes, “who was once a dancing girl, and who will ruin Yûssuf Bey as she ruined Ghûri Pasha before him, must be for ever accursed and meet with the fate of courtesans if she dare to wear the *burko* of Nefîseh.”

I had scored my second point; I had learned that the lady to whom Ali Mohammed would have had me deliver the *yashmak* was named Shâhmarâh and was evidently the favorite of the notorious Yûssuf Bey. The complacent self-satisfaction of Abû Tabâh amused me vastly, for he clearly entertained no doubts respecting his efficiency as a searcher.

He was watching me now with his strange hypnotic eyes, which had softened again, and his fixed stare caused me a certain uneasiness. For a captured thief, sitting covered by the pistol of his captor, he was ridiculously composed.

“You have performed an immoral deed,” he said sweetly, “and have pandered to the base desires of a woman of poor repute. I offer you an opportunity of performing a good deed—and of trebling your profit.”

This was as I would have it, and I nodded encouragingly.

“Unfold to me the thing that is in your mind,” I directed him.

“I am a Moslem,” he said; “and although Yûssuf Bey is a dog of dogs, he is nevertheless a True Believer—and I may not force my way into his *harêm*.”

“He might return the veil if he knew that Shâhmarâh had it,” I suggested ingenuously.

Abû Tabâh shook his head.

“There are difficulties,” he replied, “and if the theft is not to be proclaimed to the world, there is no time to be lost. This is my proposal: Return to the woman Shâhmarâh, and acquaint her with the fact that the sacred veil has been traced to her abode and her death decided upon by the Grand Mufti if it be not given up. Force the merchant Ali Mohammed to return the money received by him, using the same threat—which will prove a talisman of power. Return to the infidel woman the full amount; I will make good your commission, to which, if you be successful, I will add two hundred pounds.”

I performed some rapid thinking.

“You must give me a little time to consider this matter,” I said.

Abû Tabâh graciously inclined his head.

“On Tuesday next a company of holy men who have journeyed hither from Ispahân, go to view this relic; you have therefore five days to act.”

“And if I decline?”

Abû Tabâh shrugged his shoulders.

“The loss must be made known—it would be a great scandal; the merchant Ali Mohammed, and the woman, Shâhmarâh, must be arrested—very undesirable; *you* must be arrested—most undesirable; and your banking account will be poorer by three hundred pounds.”

“Frightfully undesirable,” I declared. “But suppose I strike the first blow and give you in charge of the police here and now?”

“You may try the experiment,” he said.

I waved my hand in the direction of the door (I had reasons for remaining in bed). “*Ma’salâma!* (Good-bye),” I said. “Don’t stay to restore the room to order. I shall expect you early in the morning. You will find the door of the hotel open any time after eight and I can highly recommend it as a mode of entrance.”

Having saluted me with both hands, Abû Tabâh made his stately departure, leaving me much exercised in mind as to how he proposed to account to the *bowwab* for his sudden appearance in the building. This, however, was no affair of mine, and, first reclosing the window, I unfastened from around my left ankle the sandalwood box and the ring which I had bound there by a piece of tape—a device to which I owed their preservation from the subtle fingers of Abû Tabâh. Furthermore, to their presence there I owed my having awakened when I did.

I am persuaded that the mysterious Egyptian's passes would have continued to keep me in a profound sleep had it not been for the pain occasioned by the pressure of the tape.

Opening the sandalwood box, and then the silver one which it enclosed, I re-examined the really wonderful specimen of embroidery whereof they formed the reliquary. The *burko* was of Tussur silk, its texture so fine that the whole veil, which was some four feet long by two wide, might have been passed through the finger ring and would readily be concealed in the palm of the hand.

It was of unusual form, having no forehead band, more nearly resembling a *yashmak* than a true *burko*, and was heavily embroidered with pearls of varying sizes and purity, although none of them were large. Its intrinsic value was considerable, but in view of its history such a valuation must have fallen far below the true one. When its loss became known, I estimated that Messrs. Moses, Murphy & Co. could readily dispose of three duplicates through various channels to wealthy collectors whose enthusiasms were greater than their morality. The sale to a museum, or to the lawful owners, of the original (known technically as "the model") would crown a sound commercial transaction.

Cock-crow that morning discovered me at the private residence, in the Boulevard Clot-Boy, of one Suleyman Levi, with whom I had had minor dealings in the past.

V

At nine o'clock on the following Monday night, an old Egyptian woman, enveloped from head to foot in a black *tôb* and wearing a black crêpe face-veil boasting a hideous brass nose-piece, halted before a doorway set in the wall guarding the great gardens of the palace of Yûssuf Bey. I was the impersonator of this decrepit female. Abû Tabâh, who thus far had accompanied me, stepped into the dense shadow of the opposite wall and was thereby swallowed up.

I rapped three times slowly upon the doorway, then twice rapidly. Almost at once a little wicket therein flew open, and a bloated negro face showed framed in the square aperture.

"The messenger from Ali Mohammed of the Sûk en-Nahhasîn," I said, in a creaky voice. "Conduct me to the Lady Shâhmarâh."

"Show her seal," answered the eunuch, extending through the opening a large, fat hand.

I gave him the ring so fortunately discovered in the *tarbûsh* of my friend the merchant and the band was withdrawn. Within a colloquy took place in which a female voice took part. Then the door was partly opened for my admittance—and I found myself in the gardens of the Bey.

In the moonlight it was a place of wonder, an enchanted demesne; but more like an Edmond Dulac water-color than a real garden. The palace with its magnificent *mushrabîyeh* windows, so poetically symbolical of veiled women, guarded by several fine, straight-limbed palm trees, spoke of the Old Cairo which saw the birth of *The Arabian Nights* and which so many of us imagine to have vanished with the *khalîfate*.

A girl completely muffled up in many-hued shawls and scarves, so that her red-slippered feet and two bright eyes heavily darkened with *kohl* were the only two portions of her person visible,

stood before me, her figure seeming childish beside that of the gross negro—whom I hated at sight because he reminded me of the one whom I had encountered in Abû Tabâh's cellar.

"Follow me, quickly, mother," said the girl. "You"—pointing imperiously at the black man—"remain here."

I followed her in silence, noting that she pursued a path which ran parallel with the wall and lay wholly in its shadow. The gardens were fragrant with the perfume of roses, and in the center was a huge marble fountain surrounded by kiosks projecting into the water, tall acacias overshadowing them. We skirted two sides of the palace, its *mushrabîyeh* windows mysteriously lighted by the moon but showing no illumination from within. There we came to the entrance to a kind of trellis-covered walk, mosaic paved and patched delightfully with mystic light. It terminated before a small but heavy and nail-studded door, of which my guide held the key.

Entering, whilst she held the door ajar, I found myself in utter darkness, to be almost immediately dispelled by the yellow gleam of a lamp which the girl took from some niche, wherein, already lighted, it had been concealed. Up a flight of bare wooden stairs she conducted me, and opened a second prison-like door at their head. Leaving the lamp upon the top step, she pushed me gently forward into a small, octagonal room, paneled in dark wood inlaid with mother-of-pearl and reminding me of the interior of a magnified *kursee* or cottee table.

Rugs and carpets strewed the floor and the air was heavy with the smell of musk, a perfume which I detest, it having characterized the personality of a certain Arab lady who sold me so marvelous a Damascus scimitar that I was utterly deceived by it until too late.

Raising a heavy curtain draped in a door shaped like an old-fashioned keyhole, and embellished with an intricate mass of fretwork carving, my guide went out, leaving me alone with my reflections. This interval was very brief, however, and was terminated by the reappearance of the girl, who this time made her entrance through a second doorway masked by the paneling. A faint musical splashing sound greeted me through the opening; and when my guide beckoned me to enter and I obeyed, I found myself in a chamber of barbaric beauty and in the presence of the celebrated Shâhmarâh.

The apartment, save for one end being wholly occupied by a magnificent *mushrabîyeh* screen, was walled with what looked like Verde Antico marble or green serpentine. An ebony couch having feet shaped as those of a leopard and enriched with gleaming bronze, having the skins of leopards cast across it, and, upon the skins, silken soft cushions wrought in patterns of green and gold, stood upon the mosaic floor at the head of three shallow steps which descended to a pool where a fountain played, softly musical; wherein lurked gleaming shapes of silver and gold. Bright mats were strewn around, and at one corner of the pool a huge silver *mibkharah* sent up its pencilings of aromatic smoke.

Upon this couch Shâhmarâh reclined, and I perceived immediately that her reputation for beauty was richly deserved. There was something leopardine in her pliant shape, which, seemed to harmonize with the fierce black and gold of the skins upon which she was stretched; she had the limbs of a Naiad and the eyes of an Egyptian Circe. Upon her head she wore a *rabtah*, or turban, of pure white, secured and decorated in front by a brooch of ancient Egyptian enamel-work probably fourteenth dynasty, and for which I would gladly have given her one hundred pounds. If I have forgotten what else she wore it may be because my senses were in somewhat of a turmoil as I stood before her in that opulent apartment—which I suddenly recognized, and not without discomfiture, to be the *meslakh* of the *hammâm*. I can only relate, then, that the image left upon my mind was one of jewels and dusky peach-like loveliness. Jewels there were in abundance, clasped about the warm curves of her arms and overloading her fingers; she wore

gold bands thickly encrusted with gems about her ankles (the slim ankles of a dancing girl); and a fiery ruby of the true pigeon's-blood color gleamed upon the first toe of her left foot, the nails of which were highly manicured and stained with henna.

Fixing her wonderful eyes upon me—

“You have brought the veil?” she said.

“The merchant Ali Mohammed ordered me to convey to him the price agreed upon, O jewel of Egypt,” I mumbled, “ere I yielded up this a poor man's only treasure.”

Sháhmarâh sat upright upon the couch. Her delicate brows were drawn together in a frown, and her eyes, rendered doubly luminous by the pigment with which they were surrounded, glared fiercely at me, whilst she stamped one bare foot upon a cushion lying on the mosaic floor.

“The veil!” she cried imperiously. “I will send the merchant Ali Mohammed an order on the treasury of the Bey.”

“O moon of the Orient,” I replied, “O ravisher of souls, I am but a poor ugly old woman basking in the radiance of beauty and loveliness. Would you ruin one so old and feeble and helpless? I must have the price agreed upon; let it be counted into this bag”—and concealing my tell-tale hands as much as possible, I bent humbly and placed a leather wallet upon a little table beside her which bore fruits, sweetmeats, and a long-necked gold flagon. “When it is done, the *yashmak* of pearls, which only thy dazzling perfection might dare to wear, shall be yielded up to thee, O daughter of musk and ambergris.”

There fell a short silence, wherein the fountain musically plashed and Sháhmarâh shot little inquiring glances laden with venom into the mists of my black veil, and others which held a query over my shoulder at her confidant.

“I might have you cast into a dungeon beneath this palace,” she hissed at me, bending lithely forward and extending a jeweled forefinger. “No one would miss thee, O mother of afflictions.”

“In that event,” I crooned quaveringly, “O tree of pearls, the veil could never be thine; for the merchant Ali Mohammed, who awaits me at the gate, refuses to deliver it up until the price agreed upon has been placed in his hands.”

“He is a Jew, and a son of Jews, who cats without washing! a devourer of pork, and an unclean insect,” she cried.

She extended the jeweled hand towards the girl who stood behind me and who, having loosened her wraps, proved to be a comely but shrewd-looking Assyrian. “Let the money be counted into the bag,” she ordered, “that we may be rid of the presence of this garrulous and hideous old hag.”

“O fountain of justice,” I exclaimed; “O peerless *houri*, to behold whom is to swoon with delight and rapture.”

From a locked closet the Assyrian girl took a wooden coffer, and before my gratified eyes began to count out upon the little table notes and gold until a pile lay there to have choked a miser with emotion. (The ready-money transactions of the East have always delighted me.) But, with the chinking of the last piece of gold upon the pile—

“There is no more,” said the girl. “It is one hundred pounds short.”

“It is more than enough!” cried Sháhmarâh. “I am ruined. Give me the veil and go.”

“O vision of paradise,” I exclaimed in anguish, “the merchant Ali Mohammed would never consent. In lieu of the remainder”—I pointed to the antique enamel in her turban—“give me the brooch from thy *rabtah*.”

“O sink of corruption!” was her response, her whole body positively quivering with rage, “it is not for thy filthy claws here!”—she pulled a ring containing a fair-sized emerald from one of her

fingers and tossed it contemptuously upon the pile of money—"thou art more than repaid. The veil! the veil!"

I turned to the girl who had counted out the gold. "O minor moon, whom even the glory of paradise cannot dim," I said, "put the money in the wallet, for my hands are old and infirm, and give it to me."

The Assyrian scooped the gold and notes into the leather hag with the utmost unconcern, and as though she had been shelling peas into a basket. The profound disregard for wealth exhibited in the *harêm* of Yûssuf Boy was extraordinary; and I mentally endorsed the opinion expressed by Abfl Tabâh that the ruin of the Boy was imminent.

Securing the heavy wallet to the girdle which I wore beneath my veulings, I placed upon the table where the money had lain a small silken packet.

"Here is the veil," I said; "for my story of the merchant, Ali Mohammed, who had refused to yield it up, was but a stratagem to test the generosity of thy soul, as thy refusal to give me the price agreed upon was but a subterfuge to test my honesty."

Heedless of the words, Shâhmarâh snatched up the packet, tore off the wrappings, and in a trice was standing upright before me wearing the *yashmak* of pearls.

I think I had never seen a figure more barbarically lovely than that of this soulless Egyptian so adorned.

"My mirror, Sâfiyeh! my mirror!" she cried.

And the girl placing a big silver mirror in her hand, she stood there looking into its surface, her wonderful eyes swimming with ecstasy and her slim body swaying in a perfect rapture of admiration for her own beauty.

Suddenly she dropped the mirror upon the cushions and threw wide her arms.

"Am I not the fairest woman in Egypt?" she exclaimed. "I tread upon the hearts of men and my power is above the power of kings!"

Then a subtle change crept over her features; and ere I could utter the first of the honeyed compliments ready upon my tongue—

"Send Amineh to warn Mahmûd that the old woman is about to depart," she directed her attendant; and, turning to me: "Wait in the outer room. Thy presence is loathsome to me, O mother of calamities."

"I hear and obey," I replied, "O pomegranate blossom"—and, following the direction of her rigidly extended finger, I shuffled back to the little octagonal apartment and the masked door was slammed almost upon my heels.

This room, which possessed no windows, was solely illuminated by a silken-shaded lantern, but I had not long to wait in that weird half-light ere my conductress, again closely muffled in her shawls, opened the door at the head of the steps and signed to me to descend.

"Lead the way, my beautiful daughter," I said; for I had no intention of submitting myself to the risk of a dagger in the back.

She consented without demur, which served to allay my suspicions somewhat, and in silence we went down the uncarpeted stairs and out into the trellis-covered walk. The shadow beneath the high wall had deepened and widened since we had last skirted the gardens, and I felt my way along with my hand cautiously outstretched.

At a point within sight of the flower-grown arbor beneath which I knew the gate to be concealed, my guide halted.

"I must return, mother," she said quickly. "There is the gate, and Mahmûd will open it for you."

“Farewell, O daughter of the willow branch,” I replied. “May Allah, the Great, the Compassionate, be with thee, and may thou marry a prince of Persia.”

Light of foot she sped away, and, my forebodings coming to a sudden climax, I crept forward with excessive caution, holding my clenched hand immediately in front of my face—a device which experience of the hospitable manners of the East had taught me.

It was well that I did so. Within three spaces of the gate a noose fell accurately over my head and was drawn tight with a strangling jerk!

But that it also encircled my upraised arm, its clasp must have terminated my wordly affairs.

My assailant had sprung upon me from behind; and, in the fleeting instant between the fall of the noose and its tightening, I turned about . . . and thrust the nose of my Colt repeater (which I grasped in that protective upraised band) fully into the grinning mouth of the negro gate-keeper!

There was a rattle and gleam of falling ivory, for several of the *bowwab's* teeth had been dislodged by the steel barrel. Keeping the weapon firmly thrust into the man's distended jaws, I circled around him, whilst his hands relaxed their hold upon the strangling-cord, and pushed him backward in the direction of the door.

“Open thou black son of offal!” I said, “or I will blow thee a cavity as wide as thy blubber mouth through the back of that fat and greasy neck! This was, no doubt, a stratagem of thy mistress to test my fitness to be entrusted with large sums of money?”

When, a few moments later, I stood in the lane outside the gardens of Yûssuf Bey, and felt with my hand the fat wallet at my waist, I experienced a thrill of professional satisfaction, for had I not successfully negotiated a duplicate veil, embroidered with imitation pearls which the excellent Suleyman Levi by dint of four days of almost ceaseless toil had made for me? . . .

From the shadows of the opposite wall Abû Tabâh stepped forth, stately.

“Quick!” I said. “I fear pursuit at any moment! Is the *arabîyeh* waiting?”

“You have it?” he demanded, some faint sign of human animation creeping over his impassive face.

“I have!” I replied. “I will give it to you in the *arabîyeh*.”

Side by side we passed down the deserted thoroughfare to where, beside a solitary palm, a pair-horse carriage was waiting. Appreciating something of my companion's natural impatience, I pressed into his hand the famous sandalwood box which once had reposed in the *tarbûsh* of Ali Mohammed. The carriage rolled around a Corner and out into the lighted Shâria Mobâdayân. Abû Tabâh opened the sandalwood box, and then, reverently, the inner box of silver. Within shimmered the pearls of the sacred *burko*. He did not touch the relic with his hands, but reclosed the boxes and concealed the reliquary beneath his black robe. I heard the crackle of notes; and a little packet surrounded by a band of elastic was pressed into my band.

“Three hundred pounds, English,” said Abû Tabâh. “One hundred pounds in recompense for the commission you returned, and two hundred pounds for the recovery of the relic.”

I thrust the wad into the bag beneath my robe containing the other spoils of the evening. A second and even more grateful glow of professional joy warmed my heart. For in the reliquary which I had handed to Abû Tabâh reposed the second product of Suleyman Levi's scientific toils; his four days' labor having resulted in the production of two quite passable duplicates; although neither were by any means up to the standard of Messrs. Moses, Murphy & Co.

Coming to the house wherein I had endued my disguise, Abû Tabâh left me to metamorphose myself into a decently dressed Englishman suitable for admission to an hotel of international repute.

“*Lîtâk sa'îda*, Abû Tabâh,” I said.

In the open doorway he turned.

“*Lîtâk sa ’îda*, Kernaby Pasha,” he replied, and smiled upon me very sweetly.

VI

It was after midnight when I returned to Shepherd’s, but I went straight to my room, and switching on the table-lamp, wrote a long letter to my principals. Something seemed to have gone wrong with the lock of my attaché-case, and my good humor was badly out of joint by the time that I succeeded in opening it. From underneath a mass of business correspondence I took out a large, sealed envelope, which I enclosed with a letter in one yet larger, to be registered to Messrs. Moses, Murphy & Co., Birmingham, in the morning. I turned in utterly tired but happy, to dream complacently of the smile of Abû Tabâh and of the party of holy men who had journeyed from Ispahân.

Exactly a fortnight later the following registered letter was handed to me as I was about to sit down to lunch—

The Hon. Neville Kernaby.
Shepherd’s hotel,
Cairo, Egypt.

DEAR MR. NEVILLE KERNABY—

We are returning herewith the silken veil which you describe as “the authentic *burko* of the Seyyîdeh Nefîseh, stolen from her shrine in the Tombs of the Khalîfs.” Your statement that you can arrange for its purchase at the cost of one thousand pounds does not interest us, nor do we expect so high-salaried an expert as yourself to send us palpable and very inferior forgeries. We are manufacturers of duplicates, not buyers of same.

Yours truly,

LLOYD LLEWELLYN.

(For Messrs. Moses, Murphy & Co.).

I was positively aghast. Tearing open the enclosed package, I glared like a madman at the *yashmak* which it contained. The silk, in comparison with that of which the real veil was compared, was coarse as cocoanut matting; the embroidery was crude; the pearls shrieked “imitation” aloud! At a glance I knew the thing for one of the pair made by Suleyman Levi!

The truth crashed in upon my mind. Following my visit to the *harêm* of Yûssuf Bey, I had bestowed no more than a glance upon the envelope wherein, early on the morning of the same day, I had lovingly sealed the authentic veil; and a full hour had elapsed between the time of parting with the sugar-lipped one and my return to my rooms at the hotel.

I understood, now, why the lock of my attaché-case had been out of order on that occasion and I comprehended the sweet smile of Abû Tabâh.