THE DANCE OF THE VEILS

Sax Rohmer

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THE DANCE OF THE VEILS

I. THE HOUSE OF THE AGAPOULOS

Hassan came in and began very deliberately to light the four lamps. He muttered to himself and often smiled in the childish manner which characterizes some Egyptians. Hassan wore a red cap, and a white robe confined at the waist by a red sash. On his brown feet he wore loose slippers, also of red. He had good features and made a very picturesque figure moving slowly about his work.

As he lighted lamp after lamp and soft illumination crept about the big room, because of the heavy shadows created the place seemed to become mysteriously enlarged. That it was an Eastern apartment cunningly devised to appeal to the Western eye, one familiar with Arab households must have seen at once. It was a traditional Oriental interior, a stage setting rather than the nondescript and generally uninteresting environment of the modern Egyptian at home.

Brightly coloured divans there were and many silken cushions of strange pattern and design. The hanging lamps were of perforated brass with little coloured glass panels. In carved wooden cabinets stood beautiful porcelain jars, trays, and vessels of silver and copper ware. Rich carpets were spread about the floor, and the draperies were elegant and costly, while two deep windows projecting over the court represented the best period of Arab architecture. Their intricate carven woodwork had once adorned the palace of a Grand Wazir. Agapoulos had bought them in Cairo and had had them fitted to his house in Chinatown. A smaller brass lamp of very delicate workmanship was suspended in each of the recesses.

As Hassan, having lighted the four larger lanterns, was proceeding leisurely to light the first of the smaller ones, draperies before a door at the east end of the room were parted and Agapoulos came in. Agapoulos was a short but portly Greek whom the careless observer might easily have mistaken for a Jew. He had much of the appearance of a bank manager, having the manners of one used to making himself agreeable, but also possessing the money−eye and that comprehensive glance which belongs to the successful man of commerce.

Standing in the centre of the place he brushed his neat black moustache with a plump forefinger. A diamond ring which he wore glittered brilliantly in the coloured rays of the lanterns. With his right hand, which rested in his trouser pocket, he rattled keys. His glance roved about the room appraisingly. Walking to a beautifully carved Arab cabinet he rearranged three pieces of Persian copperware which stood upon it. He moved several cushions,

and taking up a leopard skin which lay upon the floor he draped it over an ebony chair which was inlaid intricately with ivory.

The drooping eyelids of M. Agapoulos drooped lower, as returning to the centre of the room he critically surveyed the effect of these master touches. At the moment he resembled a window− dresser, or, rather, one of those high−salaried artists who beautify the great establishments of Regent Street, the Rue de la Paix, and Ruination Avenue, New York.

Hassan lighted the sixth lamp, muttering smilingly all the time. He was about to depart when Agapoulos addressed him in Arabic.

"There will be a party down from the Savoy tonight, Hassan. No one else is to come unless I am told. That accursed red policeman, Kerry, has been about here of late. Be very careful."

Hassan saluted him gravely and retired through one of the draped openings. In his hand he held the taper with which he had lighted the lamps. In order that the draperies should not be singed he had to hold them widely apart. For it had not occurred to Hassan to extinguish the taper. The Egyptian mind is complex in its simplicity.

M. Agapoulos from a gold case extracted a cigarette, and lighting it, inhaled the smoke contentedly, looking about him. The window−dresser was lost again in the bank manager who has arranged a profitable overdraft. Somewhere a bell rang. Hassan, treading silently, reappeared, crossed the room, and opening a finely carved door walked along a corridor which it had concealed. He still carried the lighted taper.

Presently there entered a man whose well−cut serge suit revealed the figure of a soldier. He wore a soft gray felt hat and carried light gloves and a cane. His dark face, bronzed by recent exposure to the Egyptian sun, was handsome in a saturnine fashion, and a touch of gray at the temples tended to enhance his good looks. He carried himself in that kind of nonchalant manner which is not only insular but almost insolent.

M. Agapoulos bowed extravagantly. As he laid his plump hand upon his breast the diamond ring sparkled in a way most opulent and impressive.

"I greet you, Major Grantham," he said. "Behold" he waved his hand glitteringly "all is prepared."

"Oh, yes," murmured the other, glancing around without interest; "good. You are beginning to get straight in your new quarters."

Agapoulos extended the prosperous cigarette−case, and Major Grantham took and lighted a superior cigarette.

"How many in the party?" inquired the Greek smilingly.

"Three and myself."

A shadow of a frown appeared upon the face of Agapoulos.

"Only three," he muttered.

Major Grantham laughed.

"You should know me by this time, Agapoulos," he said. "The party is small but exclusive, you understand?"

He spoke wearily, as a tired man speaks of distasteful work which he must do. There was contempt in his voice; contempt of Agapoulos, and contempt of himself.

"Ah!" cried the Greek, brightening; "do I know any of them?"

"Probably. General Sir Francis Payne, Mr. Eddie, and Sir Horace Tipton."

"An Anglo−American party, eh?"

"Quite. Mr. Eddie is the proprietor of the well−known group of American hotels justly celebrated for their great height and poisonous cuisine; while Sir Horace Tipton alike as sportsman, globe−trotter, and soap manufacturer, is characteristically British. Of General Sir Francis Payne I need only say that his home services during the war did incalculable harm to our prestige throughout the Empire."

He spoke with all the bitterness of a man who has made a failure of life. Agapoulos was quite restored to good humour.

"Ahl" he exclaimed, brushing his moustache and rattling his keys; "sportsmen, eh?"

Major Grantham dropped into the carven chair upon which the Greek had draped the leopard skin. Momentarily the window−dresser leapt into life as Agapoulos beheld one of his cunning effects destroyed, but he forced a smile when Grantham, shrugging his shoulders, replied:

"If they are fools enough to play the usual 5 per cent, on the bank's takings."

He paused, glancing at some ash upon the tip of his cigarette. Agapoulos swiftly produced an ashtray and received the ash on it in the manner of a churchwarden collecting half a crown from a pew−holder.

"I think," continued Grantham indifferently, "that it will be the dances. Two of them are over fifty."

"Ah!" said Agapoulos thoughtfully; "not, of course, the ordinary programme?"

Major Grantham looked up at him with lazy insolence.

"Why ask?" he inquired. "Does Lucullus crave for sausages? Do philosophers play marbles?"

He laughed again, noting the rather blank look of Agapoulos.

"You don't know what I'm talking about, do you?" he added. "I mean to say that these men have been everywhere and done everything. They have drunk wine sweet and sour and have swallowed the dregs. I am bringing them. It is enough."

"More than enough," declared the Greek with enthusiasm. He bowed, although Grantham was not looking at him. "In the little matter of fees I can rely upon your discretion, as always. Is it not said that a good dragoman is a desirable husband?"

Major Grantham resettled himself in his chair.

"M. Agapoulos," he said icily, "we have done shady business together for years, both in Port Said and in London, and have remained the best of friends; two blackguards linked by our common villainy. But if this pleasant commercial acquaintance is to continue let there be no misunderstanding between us, M. Agapoulos. I may know

I'm a dragoman; but in future, old friend" he turned lazy eyes upon the Greek "for your guidance, don't remind me of the fact or I'll wring your neck."

The drooping eyelids of M. Agapoulos flickered significantly, but it was with a flourish more grand than usual that he bowed.

"Pardon, pardon," he murmured. "You speak harshly of yourself, but ah, you do not mean it. We understand each other, eh?"

"I understand you perfectly," drawled Grantham; "I was merely advising you to endeavour to understand me. My party will arrive at nine o'clock, Agapoulos, and I am going back to the Savoy shortly to dress. Meanwhile, if Hassan would bring me a whisky and soda I should be obliged."

"Of course, of course. He shall do so at once," cried Agapoulos. "I will tell him."

Palpably glad to escape, the fat Greek retired, leaving Major Grantham lolling there upon the leopard skin, his hat, cane and gloves upon the carpet beside him; and a few moments later Hassan the silent glided into the extravagant apartment bearing refreshments. Placing his tray upon a little coffee−table beside Major Grantham, he departed.

There was a faint smell of perfume in the room, a heavy voluptuous smell in which the odour of sandal−wood mingled with the pungency of myrrh. It was very silent, so that when Grantham mixed a drink the pleasant chink of glass upon glass rang out sharply.

II. ZAHARA

Zahara had overheard the latter part of the conversation from her own apartment. Once she had even crept across to the carven screen in order that she might peep through into the big, softly lighted room. She had interrupted her toilet to do so, and having satisfied herself that Grantham was one of the speakers (although she had really known this already), she had returned and stared at herself critically in the mirror.

Zahara, whose father had been a Frenchman, possessed skin of a subtle cream colour very far removed from the warm brown of her Egyptian mother, but yet not white. At night it appeared dazzling, for she enhanced its smooth, creamy pallor with a wonderful liquid solution which came from Paris. It was hard, Zahara had learned, to avoid a certain streaky appearance, but much practice had made her an adept.

This portion of her toilet she had already completed and studying her own reflection she wondered, as she had always wondered, what Agapoulos could see in Safiyeh. Safiyeh was as brown as a berry; quite pretty for an Egyptian girl, as Zahara admitted scornfully, but brown brown. It was a great puzzle to Zahara. The mystery of life indeed had puzzled little Zahara very much from the moment when she had first begun to notice things with those big, surprising blue eyes of hers, right up to the present twenty− fourth year of her life. She had an uneasy feeling that Safiyeh, who was only sixteen, knew more of this mystery than she did. Once, shortly after the Egyptian girl had come to the house of Agapoulos, Zahara had playfully placed her round white arm against that of the more dusky beauty, and:

"Look!" she had exclaimed. "I am cream and you are coffee."

"It is true," the other had admitted in her practical, serious way, "but some men do not like cream. All men like coffee."

Zahara rested her elbows upon the table and surveyed the reflection of her perfect shoulders with disapproval. She

had been taught at her mother's knee that men did not understand women, and she, who had been born and reared in that quarter of Cairo where there is no day but one long night, had lived to learn the truth of the lesson. Yet she was not surprised that this was so; for Zahara did not understand herself. Her desires were so simple and so seemingly natural, yet it would appear that they were contrary to the established order of things.

She was proud to think that she was French, although someone had told her that the French, though brave, were mercenary. Zahara admired the French for being brave, and thought it very sensible that they should be mercenary. For there was nothing that Zahara wanted of the world that money could not obtain (or so she believed), and she knew no higher philosophy than the quest of happiness. Because others did not seem to share this philosophy she often wondered if she could be unusual. She had come to the conclusion that she was ignorant. If only Harry Grantham would talk to her she felt sure he could teach her so much.

There were so many things that puzzled her. She knew that at twenty−four she was young for a French girl, although as an Egyptian she would have been considered old. She had been taught that gold was the key to happiness and that man was the ogre from whom this key must be wheedled. A ready pupil, Zahara had early acquired the art of attracting, and now at twenty−four she was a past mistress of the Great Craft, and as her mirror told her, more beautiful than she had ever been.

Therefore, what did Agapoulos see in Safiyeh?

It was a problem which made Zahara's head ache. She could not understand why as her power of winning men increased her power to hold them diminished. Safiyeh was a mere inexperienced child yet Agapoulos had brought her to the house, and Zahara, wise in woman's lore, had recognized the familiar change of manner.

It was a great problem, the age−old problem which doubtless set the first silver thread among Phryne's red−gold locks and which now brought a little perplexed wrinkle between Zahara's delicately pencilled brows.

It had not always been so. In those early days in Cairo there had been an American boy. Zahara had never forgotten. Her beauty had bewildered him. He had wanted to take her to New York; and oh! how she had wanted to go. But her mother, who was then alive, had held other views, and he had gone alone. Heavens! How old she felt. How many had come and gone since that Egyptian winter, but now, although admiration was fatally easy to win how few were so sincere as that fresh−faced boy from beyond the Atlantic.

Zahara, staring into the mirror, observed that there was not a wrinkle upon her face, not a flaw upon her perfect skin. Nor in this was she blinded by vanity. Nature, indeed, had cast her in a rare mould, and from her unusual hair, which was like dull gold, to her slender ankles and tiny feet, she was one of the most perfectly fashioned human beings who ever added to the beauty of the world.

Yet Agapoulos preferred Safiyeh. Zahara could hear him coming to her room even as she sat there, chin in hands, staring at her own bewitching reflection. Presently she would slip out and speak to Harry Grantham. Twice she had read in his eyes that sort of interest which she knew so well how to detect. She liked him very much, but because of a sense of loyalty to Agapoulos (a sentiment purely Egyptian which she longed to crush) Zahara had never so much as glanced at Grantham in the Right Way. She was glad, though, that he had not gone, and she hoped that Agapoulos would not detain her long.

As a matter of fact, the Greek's manner was even more cold than usual. He rested his hand upon her shoulder for a moment, and meeting her glance reflected in the mirror:

"There will be a lot of money here to−night," he said. "Make the best of your opportunities. Chinatown is foggy, yes but it pays better than Port Said."

He ran fat fingers carelessly through her hair, the big diamond glittering effectively in the wavy gold, then turned and went out. Sitting listening intently, Zahara could hear him talking in a subdued voice to Safiyeh, and could detect the Egyptian's low−spoken replies.

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Grantham looked up with a start. A new and subtle perfume had added itself to that with which the air of the room was already laden. He found Zahara standing beside him.

His glance travelled upward from a pair of absurdly tiny brocaded shoes past slender white ankles to the embroidered edge of a wonderful mandarin robe decorated with the figures of peacocks; upward again to a little bejewelled hand which held the robe confined about the slender figure of Zahara, and upward to where, sideways upon a bare shoulder peeping impudently out from Chinese embroidery, rested the half−mocking and half−serious face of the girl.

"Hallo!" he said, smiling, "I didn't hear you come in."

"I walk very soft," explained Zahara, "because I am not supposed to be here."

She looked at him quizzically. "I don't see you for a long time," she added, and in the tone of her voice there was a caress. "I saw you more often in Port Said than here."

"No," replied Grantham, "I have been giving Agapoulos a rest. Besides, there has been nobody worth while at any of the hotels or clubs during the last fortnight."

"Somebody worth while coming to−night?" asked Zahara with professional interest.

At the very moment that she uttered the words she recognized her error, for she saw Grantham's expression change. Yet to her strange soul there was a challenge in his coldness and the joy of contest in the task of melting the ice of this English reserve.

"Lots of money," he said bitterly; "we shall all do well to− night."

Zahara did not reply for a moment. She wished to close this line of conversation which inadvertently she had opened up. So that, presently:

"You look very lonely and bored," she said softly.

As a matter of fact, it was she who was bored of the life she led in Limehouse in chilly, misty Limehouse and who had grown so very lonely since Safiyeh had come. In the dark gray eyes looking up at her she read recognition of her secret. Here was a man possessing that rare masculine attribute, intuition. Zahara knew a fear that was half delightful. Fear because she might fail in either of two ways and delight because the contest was equal.

"Yes," he replied slowly, "my looks tell the truth. How did you know?"

Zahara observed that his curiosity had not yet become actual interest. She toyed with the silken tassel on her robe, tying and untying it with quick nervous fingers and resting the while against the side of the carved chair.

"Perhaps because I am so lonely myself," she said. "I matter to no one. What I do, where I go, if I live or die. It is all "

She spread her small hands eloquently and shrugged so that another white shoulder escaped from the Chinese wrapping. Thereupon Zahara demurely drew her robe about her with a naive air of modesty which nine out of ten beholding must have supposed to be affected.

In reality it was a perfectly natural, instinctive movement. To Zahara her own beauty was a commonplace to be displayed or concealed as circumstances might dictate. In a certain sense, which few could appreciate, this half−caste dancing girl and daughter of El Wasr was as innocent as a baby. It was one of the things which men did not understand. She thought that if Harry Grantham asked her to go away with him it would be nice to go. Suddenly she realized how deep was her loathing of this Limehouse and of the people she met there, who were all alike.

He sat looking at her for some time, and then: "Perhaps you are wrong," he said. "There may be some who could understand."

And because he had answered her thoughts rather than her words, the fear within Zahara grew greater than the joy of the contest.

Awhile longer she stayed, seeking for a chink in the armour. But she failed to kindle the light in his eyes which unless she had deluded herself she had seen there in the past; and because she failed and could detect no note of tenderness in his impersonal curiosity:

"You are lonely because you are so English, so cold," she exclaimed, drawing her robe about her and glancing sideways toward the door by which Agapoulos might be expected to enter. "You are bored, yes. Of course. You look on at life. It is not exciting, that game except for the players."

Never once had she looked at him in the Right Way; for to have done so and to have evoked only that amused yet compassionate smile would have meant hatred, and Zahara had been taught that such hatred was fatal because it was a confession of defeat.

"I shall see you again to−night, shall I not?" he said as she turned away.

"Oh, yes, I shall be on show. I hope you will approve."

She tossed her head like a petulant child, turned, and with never another glance in his direction, walked from the room. She was very graceful, he thought.

Yet it was not entirely of this strange half−caste, whose beauty was provoking, although he resolutely repelled her tentative advances, that Grantham was thinking. In that last gesture when she had scornfully tossed her head in turning aside, had lain a bitter memory. Grantham stood for a moment watching the swaying draperies. Then, dropping the end of his cigarette into a little brass ash−tray, he took up his hat, gloves, and cane from the floor, and walked toward the doorway through which he had entered.

A bell rang somewhere, and Grantham paused. A close observer might have been puzzled by his expression. Evidently changing his mind, he crossed the room, opened the door and went out, leaving the house of Agapoulos by a side entrance. Crossing the little courtyard below he hurried in the direction of the main street, seeming to doubt the shadows which dusk was painting in the narrow ways.

Many men who know Chinatown distrust its shadows, but the furtive fear of which Grantham had become aware was due not to anticipation but to memory to a memory conjured up by that gesture of Zahara's.

There were few people in London or elsewhere who knew the history of this scallywag Englishman. That he had held the King's commission at some time was generally assumed to be the fact, but that his real name was not Grantham equally was taken for granted. His continuing, nevertheless, to style himself "Major" was sufficient evidence to those interested that Grantham lived by his wits; and from the fact that he lived well and dressed well one might have deduced that his wits were bright if his morals were turbid.

Now, the gesture of a woman piqued had called up the deathless past. Hurrying through nearly empty squalid streets, he found himself longing to pronounce a name, to hear it spoken that he might linger over its bitter sweetness. To this longing he presently succumbed, and:

"Inez," he whispered, and again more loudly, "Inez."

Such a wave of lonely wretchedness and remorse swept up about his heart that he was almost overwhelmed by it, yet he resigned himself to its ruthless cruelty with a sort of savage joy. The shadowed ways of Limehouse ceased to exist for him, and in spirit he stood once more in a queer, climbing, sunbathed street of Gibraltar looking out across that blue ribbon of the Straits to where the African coast lay hidden in the haze.

"I never knew," he said aloud. And one meeting this man who hurried along and muttered to himself must have supposed him to be mad. "I never knew. Oh, God! if I had only known."

But he was one of those to whom knowledge comes as a bitter aftermath. When his regiment had received orders to move from the Rock, and he had informed Inez of his departure, she had turned aside, just as Zahara had done; scornfully and in silence. Because of his disbelief in her he had guarded his heart against this beautiful Spanish girl who (as he realized too late) had brought him the only real happiness he had ever known. Often she had told him of her brother, Miguel, who would kill her would kill them both if he so much as suspected their meetings; of her affianced husband, absent in Tunis, whose jealousy knew no bounds.

He had pretended to believe, had even wanted to believe; but the witchery of the girl's presence removed, he had laughed at himself and at Inez. She was playing the Great Game, skilfully, exquisitely. When he was gone there would soon be someone else. Yet he had never told her that he doubted. He had promised many things and had left her.

She died by her own hand on the night of his departure.

Now, as a wandering taxi came into view: "Inez!" he moaned "I never knew."

That brother whom he had counted a myth had succeeded in getting on board the transport. Before Grantham's inner vision the whole dreadful scene now was reenacted: the struggle in the stateroom; he even seemed to hear the sound of the shot, to see the Spaniard, drenched with blood from a wound in his forehead, to hear his cry:

"I cannot see! I cannot see! Mother of Mercy! I have lost my sight!"

It had broken Grantham. The scandal was hushed up, but retirement was inevitable. He knew, too, that the light had gone out of the world for him as it had gone for Miguel da Mura.

It is sometimes thus that a scallywag is made.

III. THE STAR OF EGYPT

As Grantham went out by the side door, Hassan, soft of foot, appeared. Crossing to the main door he opened it

and walked down the narrow corridor beyond. Presently came the tap, tap, tap of a stick and a sound of muttered conversation in some place below.

Hassan reentered and went in through the curtained doorway to summon Agapoulos. Agapoulos was dressing and would not be disturbed. Hassan went back to those who waited, but ere long returned again chattering volubly to himself. Going behind the carven screen he rapped upon the door of Zahara's room, and she directed him to come in. To Zahara, Hassan was no more than a piece of furniture, and she thought as little of his intruding while she was in the midst of her toilet as another woman would have thought of the entrance of a maid.

"Two men," reported Hassan, "who won't go away until they see somebody."

"Whom do they want to see?" she inquired indifferently, adjusting the line of her eyebrow with an artistically pointed pencil.

"They say whoever belongs here."

Zahara invariably spoke either French or English to natives, and if Hassan had addressed her in Arabic she would not have replied, although she spoke that language better than she spoke any other.

"What are they like? Not police?"

"Foreign," replied Hassan vaguely.

"English American?"

"No, not American or English. Very black hair, dark skin."

Zahara, a student of men, became aware of a mild interest. These swarthy visitors should prove an agreeable antidote to the poisonous calm of Harry Grantham. She was trying with all the strength of her strange, stifled soul not to think of Grantham, and she was incapable of recognizing the fact that she could think of nothing else and had thought of little else for a long time past. Even now it was because of him that she determined to interview the foreign visitors. The mystery of her emotions puzzled her more than ever.

She descended to a small, barely furnished room on the ground floor, close beside the door opening upon the street. It was lighted by one hanging lamp. On the divan which constituted the principal item of furniture a small man, slenderly built, was sitting. He wore a broad−brimmed hat, so broad of brim that it threw the whole of the upper part of his face into shadow. It was impossible to see his eyes. Beside him rested a heavy walking−stick.

As Zahara entered, a wonderful, gaily coloured figure, this man did not move in the slightest, but sat, chin on breast, his small, muscular, brown hands resting on his knees. His companion, however, a person of more massive build, elegantly dressed and handsome in a swarthy fashion, bowed gravely and removed his hat. Zahara liked his eyes, which were dark and very bold looking.

"M. Agapoulos is engaged," she said, speaking in French. "What is it you wish to know?"

The man regarded her fixedly, and:

"Senorita," he replied, "I will be frank with you."

Save for his use of the word "senorita" he also spoke in French. Zahara drew her robe more closely about her and adopted her most stately manner.

"My name," continued the other, "does not matter, but my business is to look into the affairs of other people, you understand?"

Zahara, who understood from this that the man was some kind of inquiry agent, opened her blue eyes very widely and at the same time shook her head.

"No," she protested; "what do you mean?"

"A certain gentleman came here a short time ago, came into this house and must be here now. Don't be afraid. He has done nothing very dreadful," he added reassuringly.

Zahara retreated a step, and a little wrinkle of disapproval appeared between her pencilled brows. She no longer liked the man's eyes, she decided. They were deceitful eyes. His companion had taken up the heavy stick and was restlessly tapping the floor.

"There is no one here," said Zahara calmly, "except the people who live in the house."

"He is here, he is here," muttered the man seated on the divan.

The tapping of his stick had grown more rapid, but as he had spoken in Spanish, Zahara, who was ignorant of that language, had no idea what he had said.

"My friend," continued the Spaniard, bowing slightly in the direction of the slender man who so persistently kept his broad− brimmed hat on his head, "chanced to hear the voice of this gentleman as he spoke to your porter on entering the door. And although the door was closed too soon for us actually to see him, we are convinced that he is the person we seek."

"I think you are mistaken," said Zahara coolly. "But what do you want him for?"

As she uttered the words she realized that even the memory of Grantham was sufficient to cause her to betray herself. She had betrayed her interest to the man himself, and now she had betrayed it to this dark−faced stranger whose manner was so mysterious. The Spaniard recognized the fact, and, unlike Grantham, acted upon it promptly.

"He has taken away the wife of another, Senorita," he said simply, and watched her as he spoke the lie.

She listened in silence, wide−eyed. Her lower lip twitched, and she bit it fiercely.

"He went first to Port Said and then came to London with this woman," continued the Spaniard remorselessly. "We come from her husband to ask her to return. Yes, he will forgive her or he offers her freedom."

Rapidly but comprehensively the speaker's bold glance travelled over Zahara, from her golden head to her tiny embroidered shoes.

"If you can help us in this matter it will be worth fifty English pounds to you," he concluded.

Zahara was breathing rapidly. The fatal hatred which she had sought to stifle gained a new vitality. Another woman another woman actually here in London! So there was someone upon whom he did not look in that half−amused and half−compassionate manner. How she hated him! How she hated the woman to whom he had but a moment ago returned!

"Then he will marry this other one?" she said suddenly.

"Oh, no. Already he neglects her. We think she will go back."

Zahara experienced a swift change of sentiment. She seemed to be compounded of two separate persons, one of whom laughed cruelly at the folly of the other.

"What is the name of this man you think your friend has recognized?" she asked.

The big stick was rapping furiously during this colloquy.

"We are both sure, Senorita. His name is Major Spalding."

That Spalding and Grantham were neighbouring towns in Lincolnshire Zahara did not know, but:

"No one of that name comes here," she replied.

"The one you heard and who has gone is not called by that name." She spoke with forced calm. It was Grantham they sought! "But what happens if I show you this one who is not called Spalding?"

"No matter! Point him out to me," answered the Spaniard eagerly and his dark eyes seemed to be on fire "point him out to me and fifty pounds of English money is yours!"

"Let me see."

He drew out a wallet and held up a number of notes.

"Fifty," he said, in a subdued voice, "when you point him out."

For a long moment Zahara hesitated, then:

"Sixty," she corrected him "now! Then I will do it to−night if you tell what happens."

Exhibiting a sort of eager impatience the man displayed a bunch of official−looking documents.

"I give him these," he explained, "and my work is done."

"H'm," said Zahara. "He must not know that it is I who have shown him to you. To−night he will be here at nine o'clock, and I shall dance. You understand?"

"Then," said the Spaniard eagerly, "this is what you will do."

And speaking close to her ear he rapidly outlined a plan; but presently she interrupted him.

"Pooh! It is Spanish, the rose. I dance the dances of Egypt."

"But to−night," he persisted, "it will not matter."

Awhile longer they talked, the rapping of the stick upon the tiled floor growing ever faster and faster. But finally:

"I will tell Hassan that you are to be admitted," said Zahara, and she held out her hand for the notes.

When, presently, the visitors departed, she learned that the smaller man was blind; for his companion led him out of the room and out of the house. She stood awhile listening to the tap, tap, tap of the heavy stick receding along the street. What she did not hear, and could not have understood had she heard, since it was uttered in Spanish, was the cry of exultant hatred which came from the lips of the taller man:

"At last, Miguel! at last! Though blind, you have found him! You have not failed. I shall not fail!"

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Zahara peeped through the carved screen at the assembled company. They were smoking and drinking and seemed to be in high good humour. Safiyeh had danced and they had applauded the performance, but had complained to M. Agapoulos that they had seen scores of such dances and dancers. Safiyeh, who had very little English, had not understood this, and because presently she was to play upon the a'ood while Zahara danced the Dance of the Veils, Zahara had avoided informing her of the verdict of the company.

Now as she peeped through the lattice in the screen she could see the Greek haggling with Grantham and a tall gray−haired man whom she supposed to be Sir Horace Tipton. They were debating the additional fees to be paid if Zahara, the Star of Egypt, was to present the secret and wonderful dance of which all men had heard but which only a true daughter of the ancient tribe of the Ghawazi could perform.

Sometimes Zahara was proud of her descent from a dancing−girl of Kenneh. This was always at night, when a sort of barbaric excitement possessed her which came from the blood of her mother. Then, a new light entered her eyes and they seemed to grow long and languid and dark, so that no one would have suspected that in daylight they were blue.

A wild pagan abandon claimed her, and she seemed to hear the wailing of reed instruments and the throb of the ancient drums which were played of old before the kings of Egypt. Safiyeh was not a true dancing girl, and because she knew none of those fine frenzies, she danced without inspiration, like a brown puppet moved by strings. But she could play upon an a'ood much better than Zahara, and therefore must not be upset until she had played for the Dance of the Veils.

Seeing that the bargain was all but concluded, Zahara stole back to her room. Her lightly clad body gleamed like that of some statue become animate.

Her cheeks flushed as she took up the veils, of which she alone knew the symbolic meaning; the white veil, the purple veil: each had its story to tell her; and the veil of burning scarlet. In a corner of the big room on a divan near the door she had seen the Spaniard, a handsome, swarthy figure in his well−fitting dress clothes, and now, opening a drawer, she glanced at the little pile of notes which represented her share of the bargain. There were fifty. She had told Agapoulos that a distinguished foreigner with an introduction from someone she knew had paid ten pounds to be present. And because she had given Agapoulos the ten pounds, Agapoulos had agreed to admit the visitor.

She could hear the Greek approaching now, but she was thinking of Grantham whom she had last seen in laughing conversation with the tall, gray−haired man. His laughter had appeared forced. Doubtless he grew weary of the woman he had brought to London.

"Dance to−night with all the devil that is in you, my beautiful," said Agapoulos, hurrying into the room.

Zahara turned aside, toying with the veils.

"They are rich, eh?" she said indifferently.

She was thinking of the fifty pounds which she had earned so easily; and after all (how strangely her mind wandered) perhaps he was really tired of the woman. The Spaniard had said so.

"Very rich," murmured Agapoulos complacently.

He brushed his moustache and rattled keys in his pocket. In his dress clothes he looked like the manager of a prosperous picture palace. "Safryeh!" he called.

When presently the music commenced, the players concealed behind the tall screen, an expectant hush fell upon the wine−flushed company. Hassan, who played the darabukkeh, could modulate its throbbing so wonderfully.

Zahara entered the room, enveloped from shoulders to ankles in a flame−coloured cloak. Between her lips she held a red rose.

"By God, what a beauty!" said a husky voice.

Zahara did not know which of the party had spoken, but she was conscious of the fact that by virtue of the strange witchcraft which became hers on such nights she held them all spell−bound. They were her slaves.

Slowly she walked across the apartment while the throbbing of the Arab drum grew softer and softer, producing a weird effect of space and distance. All eyes were fixed upon her, and meeting Grantham's gaze she saw at last the Light there which she knew. This sudden knowledge of triumph almost unnerved her, and the rose which she had taken from between her lips trembled in her white fingers. Two of the petals fell upon the carpet, which was cream−coloured from the looms of Ispahan. Like blood spots the petals lay upon the cream surface.

Zahara swung sharply about. Agapoulos, seated alone in the chair over which he had draped the leopard skin, was busily brushing his moustache and glancing sideways toward the screen which concealed Safryeh. Zahara tilted her head on to her shoulder and cast a languorous glance into the shadows masking the watchful Spaniard.

She could see his eyes gleaming like those of a wild beast. An icy finger seemed to touch her heart. He had lied to her! She knew it, suddenly, intuitively. Well, she would see. She also had guile.

With a little scornful laugh Zahara tossed the rose on to the knees of Agapoulos.

The sound of three revolver shots fired in quick succession rang out above the throbbing music. Agapoulos clutched at his shirt front with both hands, uttered a stifled scream and tried to stand up. He coughed, and glaring straight in front of him fell forward across a little coffee table laden with champagne bottles and glasses.

Coincident with the crash made by his falling body came the loud bang of a door. The Spaniard had gone.

"By God, sir! It's murder, it's murder!" cried the same husky voice which had commented upon the beauty of Zahara.

There was a mingling, purposeless movement. Someone ran to the door to find that it was locked from the outside. Mr. Eddie, now recognizable by his accent, came toward the prone man, dazed, horrified, and grown very white. Zahara, a beautiful, tragic figure, in her flaming cloak, stood looking down at the dead man. Safiyeh was peeping round from behind the screen, her face a brown mask of terror. Hassan, holding his drum, appeared behind her, staring stupidly. To the smell of cigar smoke and perfume a new and acrid odour was added.

Vaguely the truth was stealing in upon the mind of the dancing− girl that she had been made party to a plot to murder Grantham. She had saved his life. He belonged to her now. She could hear him speaking, although for

some reason she could not see him. A haze had come, blotting out everything but the still, ungainly figure which lay so near her upon the carpet, one clutching, fat hand, upon which a diamond glittered, outstretched so that it nearly touched her bare white feet.

"We must get out this way! The side door to the courtyard! None of us can afford to be mixed up in an affair of this sort."

There was more confused movement and a buzz of excited voices meaningless, chaotic. Zahara could feel the draught from the newly opened door. A thin stream of blood was stealing across the carpet. It had almost reached the fallen rose petals, which it strangely resembled in colour under the light of the lanterns.

As though dispersed by the draught, the haze lifted, and Zahara saw Grantham standing by the open doorway through which he had ushered out the other visitors.

Wide−eyed and piteous she met his glance. She had seen that night the Look in his eyes. She had saved his life, and there was much, so much, that she wanted to tell him. A thousand yearnings, inexplicable, hitherto unknown, deep mysteries of her soul, looked out of those great eyes.

"Don't think," he said tensely, "that I was deceived. I saw the trick with the rose! You are as guilty as your villainous lover! Murderess!"

He went out and closed the door. The flame−coloured cloak slowly slipped from Zahara's shoulders, and the veils, like falling petals, began to drop gently one by one upon the blood−stained carpet.