

A Hashish–House in New York

H. H. Kane

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"And so you think that opium–smoking as seen in the foul cellars of Mott Street and elsewhere is the only form of narcotic indulgence of any consequence in this city, and that hashish, if used at all, is only smoked occasionally and experimentally by a few scattered individuals?"

"That certainly is my opinion, and I consider myself fairly well informed."

"Well, you are far from right, as I can prove to you if you care to inform yourself more fully on the subject. There is a large community of hashish smokers in this city, who are daily forced to indulge their morbid appetites, and I can take you to a house up–town where hemp is used in every conceivable form, and where the lights, sounds, odors, and surroundings are all arranged so as to intensify and enhance the effects of this wonderful narcotic."

"I must confess that I am still incredulous."

"Well, if it is agreeable to you, meet me at the Hoffman House reading–room to–morrow night at ten o'clock, and I think I shall be able to convince you."

The above is the substance of a conversation that took place in the lobby of a down–town hotel between the writer of these lines and a young man about thirty–eight years of age, known to me for some years past as an opium–smoker. It was through his kindness that I had first gained access to and had been able to study up the subject of opium–smoking. Hence I really anticipated seeing some interesting phases of hemp indulgence, and was not disappointed.

The following evening at precisely ten o'clock I met the young man at the Hoffman House, and together we took a Broadway car up–town, left it at Forty–second Street, and walked rapidly toward the North River, talking as we went.

"You will probably be greatly surprised at many things you will see to–night," he said, "just as I was when I was first introduced into the place by a friend. I have travelled over most of Europe, and have smoked opium in every joint in America, but never saw anything so curious as this, nor experienced any intoxication so fascinating yet so terrible as that of hashish."

"Are the habitues of this place of the same class as those who frequent the opium–smoking dives?"

"By no means. They are about evenly divided between Americans and foreigners; indeed, the place is kept by a Greek, who has invested a great deal of money in it. All the visitors, both male and female, are of the better classes, and absolute secrecy is the rule. The house has been opened about two years, I believe, and the number of regular habitues is daily on the increase."

"Are you one of the number?"

"I am, and find the intoxication far pleasanter and less hurtful than that from opium. Ah! here we are."

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We paused before a gloomy–looking house, entered the gate, and passed up the steps. The windows were absolutely dark, and the entranceway looked dirty and desolate. Four pulls at the bell, a pause, and one more pull were followed by a few moments' silence, broken suddenly by the sound of falling chain, rasping bolt, and the grinding of a key in the lock. The outer door was cautiously opened, and at a word from my companion we passed into the vestibule. The outer door was carefully closed by some one whom I could not distinguish in the utter darkness. A moment later the inner door was opened, and never shall I forget the impression produced by the sudden change from total darkness to the strange scene that met my eyes. The dark vestibule was the boundary line separating the cold, dreary streets and the ordinary world from a scene of Oriental magnificence.

A volume of heavily scented air, close upon the heels of which came a deadly sickening odor, wholly unlike anything I had ever smelled, greeted my nostrils. A hall lamp of grotesque shape flooded the hall with a subdued violet light that filtered through crenated disks of some violet fabric hung below it. The walls and ceilings, if ever modern, were no longer so, for they were shut in and hung by festoons and plaits of heavy cloth fresh from Eastern looms. Tassels of blue, green, yellow, red, and tinsel here and there peeped forth, matching the curious edging of variously colored bead–work that bordered each fold of drapery like a huge procession of luminous ants, and seemed to flow into little phosphorescent pools wherever the cloth was caught up. Queer figures and strange lettering, in the same work, were here and there disclosed upon the ceiling cloth.

Along one side of the hall, between two doors, were ranged huge tubs and pots of majolica–like ware and blue–necked Japanese vases, in which were plants, shrubs, and flowers of the most exquisite color and odor. Green vines clambered up the walls and across the ceiling, and catching their tendrils in the balustrades of the stairs (which were also of curious design), threw down long sprays and heavy festoons of verdure.

As my companion, who had paused a moment to give me time to look about me, walked toward the far end of the hall, I followed him, and passed into a small room on the right, where, with the assistance of a colored servant, we exchanged our coats, hats, and shoes for others more in keeping with our surroundings. First a long plush gown, quilted with silk down the front, and irregularly ornamented in bead and braid with designs of serpents, flowers, crescents, and stars, was slipped on over the head. Next a tasselled smoking–cap was donned, and the feet incased in noiseless list slippers. In any other place or under any other circumstances I should have felt ridiculous in this costume, but so in keeping was it with all I had seen, and so thoroughly had I seemed to have left my every–day self in the dark vestibule, that I felt perfectly at home in my strange dress. We next crossed the hall to a smaller room, where a young man, apparently a Frenchman, furnished us, on the payment of two dollars each, with two small pipes and a small covered bronze cup, or urn, filled with a dry green shrub, which I subsequently learned was gunjeh (the dried tops and leaves of the hemp plant), for smoking. My friend, on the payment of a further sum, obtained a curious little box which contained some small black lozenges, consisting of the resin of hemp, henbane, crushed datura seeds, butter, and honey, and known in India as Majoon, amongst the Moors as El Mogen.

Passing from this room we ascended the richly carpeted stairs, enarboled by vines, and paused upon a landing from which three doors opened. Upon one a pink card bore Dryden's line,

"Take the good the gods provide thee."

The knob turned by my friend's hand allowed the door to swing open, and, welcomed by a spice breeze from India, we were truly in paradise.

"This," he said, in a whisper, "is the public room, where any one having pipe or lozenge, and properly attired, may enter and indulge–eat, smoke, or dream, as best suits him."

Wonder, amazement, admiration, but faintly portray my mental condition. Prepared by what I had already seen and experienced for something odd and Oriental, still the magnificence of what now met my gaze far surpassed

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anything I had ever dreamed of, and brought to my mind the scenes of the Arabian Nights, forgotten since boyhood until now. My every sense was irresistibly taken captive, and it was some moments before I could realize that I really was not the victim of some dream, for I seemed to have wholly severed my connection with the world of today, and to have stepped back several centuries into the times of genii, fairies, and fountains—into the very heart of Persia or Arabia.

Not an inharmonious detail marred the symmetry of the whole. Beneath, my feet sank almost ankle-deep into a velvety Carpet—a sea of subdued colors. Looked at closely, I found that the design was that of a garden: beds of luxurious flowers, stars and crescents, squares and diamond-shaped plots, made up of thousands of rare exotics and richly colored leaves. Here a brook, edged with damp verdure, from beneath which peeped coy violets and tiny bluebells; there a serpentine gravelled walk that wound in and out amongst the exquisite plants, and everywhere a thousand shrubs in bloom or bud. Above, a magnificent chandelier, consisting of six dragons of beaten gold, from whose eyes and throats sprang flames, the light from which, striking against a series of curiously set prisms, fell shattered and scintillating into a thousand glancing beams that illuminated every corner of the room. The rows of prisms being of clear and variously colored glass, and the dragons slowly revolving, a weird and ever-changing hue was given to every object in the room.

All about the sides of the spacious apartment, upon the floor, were mattresses covered with different-colored cloth, and edged with heavy golden fringe. Upon them were carelessly strewn rugs and mats of Persian and Turkish handicraft, and soft pillows in heaps. Above the level of these divans there ran, all about the room, a series of huge mirrors framed with gilded serpents intercoiled, effectually shutting off the windows. The effect was magnificent. There seemed to be twenty rooms instead of one, and everywhere could be seen the flame-tongued and fiery-eyed dragons slowly revolving, giving to all the appearance of a magnificent kaleidoscope in which the harmonious colors were ever blending and constantly presenting new combinations.

Just as I had got thus far in my observations I caught sight of my friend standing at the foot of one of the divans, and beckoning to me. At the same moment I also observed that several of the occupants of other divans were eying me suspiciously. I crossed to where he was, esteeming it a desecration to walk on such a carpet, and, despite my knowledge to the contrary, fearing every moment to crush some beautiful rose or lily beneath my feet. Following my friend's example, I slipped off my list foot-gear, and half reclined beside him on the divan and pillows, that seemed to reach up and embrace us. Pulling a tasselled cord that bung above our heads, my friend spoke a few words to a gaudily turbaned colored servant who came noiselessly into the room in answer to his summons, disappeared again, and in a moment returned bearing a tray, which he placed between us. Upon it was a small lamp of silver filigree-work, two globe-like bowls, of silver also, from which protruded a long silver tube and a spoon-like instrument. The latter, I soon learned, was used to clean and fill the pipes. Placing the bronze jar of hashish on the tray, my friend bade me lay my pipe beside it, and suck up the fluid in the silver cup through the long tube. I did so, and found it delicious.

"That," said he, "is tea made from the genuine coca leaf. The cup is the real mate and the tube a real bombilla from Peru. Now let us smoke. The dried shrub here is known as gunjeh, and is the dried tops of the hemp plant. Take a little tobacco from that jar and mix with it, else it will be found difficult to keep it alight. These lozenges here are made from the finest Nepaul resin of the hemp, mixed with butter, sugar, honey, flour, pounded datura seeds, some opium, and a little henbane, or hyoscyamus. I prefer taking these to smoking, but, to keep you company, I will also smoke to-night. Have no fear. Smoke four or five pipefuls of the gunjeh, and enjoy the effect. I will see that no harm befalls you."

Swallowing two of the lozenges, my guide filled our pipes, and we proceeded to smoke, and watch the others. These pipes, the stems of which were about eighteen inches in length, were incrustated with designs in varicolored beads, strung on gold wire over a ground of some light spirally twisted tinsel, marked off into diamondshaped spaces by thin red lines. From the stem two green and yellow silken tassels depended. A small bell-shaped piece of clouded amber formed the mouthpiece, while at the other end was a small bowl of red clay scarcely larger than

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a thimble. As I smoked I noticed that about two–thirds of the divans were occupied by persons of both sexes, some of them masked, who were dressed in the same manner as ourselves. Some were smoking, some reclining listlessly upon the pillows, following the tangled thread of a hashish reverie or dream. A middle–aged woman sat bolt–upright, gesticulating and laughing quietly to herself; another with lack–lustre eyes and dropped jaw was swaying her head monotonously from side to side. A young man of about eighteen was on his knees, praying inaudibly; and another man, masked, paced rapidly and noiselessly up and down the room, until led away somewhere by the turbaned servant.

As I smoked, the secret of that heavy, sickening odor was made clear to me. It was the smell of burning hashish. Strangely enough, it did not seem to be unpleasant any longer, for, although it rather rasped my throat at first, I drew large volumes of it into my lungs. Lost in lazy reverie and perfect comfort, I tried to discover whence came the soft, undulating strains of music that had greeted me on entering, and which still continued. They were just perceptible above the silvery notes of a crystal fountain in the centre of the room, the falling spray from which plashed and tinkled musically as it fell from serpents' mouths into a series of the very thinnest huge pink shells held aloft by timid hares. The music seemed to creep up through the heavy carpet, to ooze from the walls, to flurry, like snow–flakes, from the ceiling, rising and falling in measured cadences unlike any music I had ever heard. It seemed to steal, now softly, now merrily, on tiptoe into the room to see whether we were awake or asleep, to brush away a tear, if tear there was, or gambol airily and merrily, if such was our humor, and then as softly, sometimes sadly, to steal out again and lose itself in the distance. It was just such music as a boatful of fairies sailing about in the clear water of the fountain might have made, or that with which an angel mother would sing its angel babe to sleep. It seemed to enter every fibre of the body, and satisfy a music–hunger that had never before been satisfied. I silently filled my second pipe, and was about to lapse again into a reverie that had become delightfully full of perfect rest and comfort, when my companion, leaning toward me, said:

"I see that you are fast approaching Hashishdom. Is there not a sense of perfect rest and strange, quiet happiness produced by it?"

"There certainly is. I feel supremely happy, at peace with myself and all the world, and all that I ask is to be let alone. But why is everything so magnificent here" Is it a whim of the proprietor, or an attempt to reproduce some such place in the East?" I asked. "Possibly the latter; but there is another reason that you may

understand better later. It is this: the color and peculiar phases of a hashish dream are materially affected by one's surroundings just prior to the sleep. The impressions that we have been receiving

Ever since we entered, the sights, odors, sounds, and colors, are the strands which the deft fingers of imagination will weave into the hemp reveries and dreams, which seem as real as those of every–day life, and always more grand. Hashish eaters and smokers in the East recognized this fact, and always, prior to indulging in the drug, surrounded themselves with the most pleasing sounds, faces, forms, etc."

"I see," I answered, dreamily. "But what is there behind those curtains that I see moving now and again?" The heavy curtains just opposite where we lay seemed to shut in an alcove.

"There are several small rooms there," said my companion, shut off from this room by the curtains you see move. Each is magnificently fitted up, I am told. They are reserved for persons, chiefly ladies, who wish to avoid every possibility of detection, and at the same time enjoy their hashish and watch the inmates of this room."

"Are there many ladies of good social standing who come here?"

"Very many. Not the cream of the demimonde, understand me, but ladies. Why, there must be at least six hundred in this city alone who are habitués. Smokers from different cities, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, and especially New Orleans, tell me that each city has its hemp retreat, but none so elegant as this."

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And my companion swallowed another lozenge and relapsed into dreamy silence. I too lay back listlessly, and was soon lost in reverie, intense and pleasant. Gradually the room and its inmates faded from view; the revolving dragons went swifter and more swiftly, until the flaming tongues and eyes were merged into a huge ball of flame, that, suddenly detaching itself with a sharp sound from its pivot, went whirling and streaming off into the air until lost to sight in the skies. Then a sudden silence, during which I heard the huge waves of an angry sea breaking with fierce monotony in my head. Then I heard the fountain; the musical tinkle of the spray as it struck upon the glass grew louder and louder, and the notes longer and longer, until they merged into one clear, musical bugle note that woke the echoes of a spring morning, and broke sharp and clear over hill and valley, meadow–land and marsh, hill–top and forest. A gayly caparisoned horseman, bugle in hand, suddenly appeared above a hill–crest. Closely following, a straggling group of horsemen riding madly. Before them a pack of hounds came dashing down the hill–side, baying deeply. Before them I, the fox, was running with the speed of desperation, straining every nerve to distance or elude them. Thus for miles and miles I ran on until at last, almost dead with fright and fatigue, I fell panting in the forest. A moment more and the cruel hounds would have had me, when suddenly a little field–mouse appeared, caught me by the paw, and dragged me through the narrow entrance to her nest. My body lengthened and narrowed until I found myself a serpent, and in me rose the desire to devour my little preserver, when, as I was about to strike her with my fangs, she changed into a beautiful little fairy, tapped my ugly black flat head with her wand, and as my fangs fell to earth I resumed my human shape. With the parting words, "Never seek to injure those who endeavor to serve you," she disappeared.

Looking about I found myself in a huge cave, dark and noisome. Serpents hissed and glared at me from every side, and huge lizards and ugly shapes scrambled over the wet floor. In the far corner of the cave I saw piles of precious stones of wondrous value that glanced and sparkled in the dim light. Despite the horrid shapes about me, I resolved to secure some, at least, of these precious gems. I began to walk toward them, but found that I could get no nearer just as fast as I advanced, so fast did they seem to recede. At last, after what seemed a year's weary journey, I suddenly found myself beside them, and falling on my knees, began to fill my pockets, bosom, even my hat. Then I tried to rise, but could not: the jewels weighed me down. Mortified and disappointed, I replaced them all but three, weeping bitterly. As I rose to my feet it suddenly occurred to me that this was in no way real–only a hashish dream. And, laughing, I said, "You fool, this is all nonsense. These are not real jewels; they only exist in your imagination." My real self arguing thus with my hashish self, which I could see, tired, ragged, and weeping, set me to laughing still harder, and then we laughed together–my two selves. Suddenly my real self faded away, and a cloud of sadness and misery settled upon me, and I wept again, throwing myself hysterically upon the damp floor of the cave.

Just then I heard a voice addressing me by name, and looking up, I saw an old man with an enormous nose bending over me. His nose seemed almost as large as his whole body. "Why do you weep, my son?" he said; "are you sad because you can not have all these riches? Don't, then, for some day you will learn that whoso hath more wealth than is needed to minister to his wants must suffer for it. Every farthing above a certain reasonable sum will surely bring some worry, care, anxiety, or trouble. Three diamonds are your share; be content with them. But, dear me, here I am again neglecting my work! Here it is March, and I'm not half through yet! "

"Pray what is your work, venerable patriarch?" I asked; "and why has the Lord given you such a huge proboscis?"

"Ah! I see that you don't know me," he replied. "I am the chemist of the earth's bowels, and it is my duty to prepare all the sweet and delicate odors that the flowers have. I am busy all winter making them, and early in the spring my nymphs and apprentices deliver them to the Queen of the Flowers, who in turn gives them to her subjects. My nose is a little large because I have to do so much smelling. Come and see my laboratory."

His nose a little large! I laughed until I almost cried at this, while following him.

He opened a door, and entering, my nostrils met the oddest medley of odors I had ever smelled. Everywhere workmen with huge noses were busy mixing, filtering, distilling, and the like.

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"Here," said the old man, "is a batch of odor that has been spoiled. Mistakes are frequent, but I find use for even such as that. The Queen of Flowers gives it to disobedient plants or flowers. You mortals call it asafoetida. Come in here and see my organ;" and he led the way into a large rocky room, at one end of which was a huge organ of curious construction. Mounting to the seat, he arranged the stops and began to play.

Not a sound could be heard, but a succession of odors swept past me, some slowly, some rapidly. I understood the grand idea in a moment. Here was music to which that of sound was coarse and earthly. Here was a harmony, a symphony, of odors! Clear and sharp, intense and less intense, sweet, less sweet, and again still sweeter, heavy and light, fast and slow, deep and narcotic, the odors, all in perfect harmony, rose and fell, and swept by me, to be succeeded by others.

Irresistibly I began to weep, and fast and thick fell the tears, until I found myself a little stream of water, that, rising in the rocky caverns of the mountain, dashed down its side into the plain below. Fiercely the hot sun beat upon my scanty waters, and like a thin gray mist I found myself rising slowly into the skies, no longer a stream. With other clouds I was swept away by the strong and rapid wind far across the Atlantic, over the burning sand wastes of Africa, dipping toward the Arabian Sea, and suddenly falling in huge rain–drops into the very heart of India, blossoming with poppies. As the ground greedily sucked up the refreshing drops I again assumed my form.

Suddenly the earth was rent apart, and falling upon the edge of a deep cavern, I saw far below me a molten, hissing sea of fire, above which a dense vapor hung. Issuing from this mist, a thousand anguished faces rose toward me on scorched and broken wings, shrieking and moaning as they came.

"Who in Heaven's name are these poor things?"

"These," said a voice at my side, "are the spirits, still incarnate, of individuals who, during life, sought happiness in the various narcotics. Here, after death, far beneath, they live a life of torture most exquisite, for it is their fate, ever suffering for want of moisture, to be obliged to yield day by day their life–blood to form the juice of poppy and resin of hemp in order that their dreams, joys, hopes, pleasures, pains, and anguish of past and present may again be tasted by mortals."

As he said this I turned to see who he was, but he had disappeared. Suddenly I heard a fierce clamor, felt the scrawny arms of these foul spirits wound about my neck, in my hair, on my limbs, pulling me over into the horrible chasm, into the heart of hell, crying, shrilly, "Come! thou art one of us. Come! come! come!" I struggled fiercely, shrieked out in my agony, and suddenly awoke, with the cold sweat thick upon me.

"Are you, then, so fond of it that nothing can awaken you? Here have I been shaking and pulling you for the past five minutes. Come, rouse yourself; your dreams seem to be unpleasant."

Gradually my senses became clearer. The odors of the room, the melodies of early evening, the pipe that had fallen from my hand, the faces and forms of the hemp–smokers, were once more recognized.

My companion wished me to stay, assuring me that I would see many queer sights before morning, but I declined, and after taking, by his advice, a cup of Paraguay tea (coca leaf), and then a cup of sour lemonade, I passed down–stairs, exchanged my present for my former dress, returned my pipe, and left the house.

The dirty streets, the tinkling car–horse bell, the deafening "Here you are! twenty sweet oranges for a quarter!" and the drizzling rain were more grateful by far than the odors, sounds, and sights, sweet though they were, that I had just left. Truly it was the cradle of dreams rocking placidly in the very heart of a great city, translated from Bagdad to Gotham.