Kiss of Evil

A Tale of Seduction and Human Bondage

By
Ezra Bedford

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Dedicated to the memory of Sax Rohmer (1883-1959)

INTRODUCTION

It is entirely possible that Benedict Constant Perryman will be long revered by the public as a brilliant journalist. And on this score that public will, in a rare display of sound judgment, be declared correct. But, by those who were close to him – or as close as such a man allowed – the most notable aspect of his character was his confirmed misogyny and distaste for feminine wiles and frippery of any kind.

The mere sound of a girlish giggle, or worse, a hectoring and shrewish tone, was almost enough in itself to have him seeking the most isolated and self-flagellatory bastion of monkish privation.

His distaste for the society of women amounted to a mania, and to Perryman it made no difference if the package came in a pretty face with well-turned ankles or a face mirroring the features of an ill-bred Mastiff with slobbery chops.

Whatever their level of physical attraction, angelic or canine, the presence of women in his life was akin to that of a red rag waved under the snorting nose of an already irritated and long-horned Limousin.

This was all the more extraordinary, since Perryman, aside from being one of the most handsome men I ever knew, was of that number of our gender who, aside from being sociable, did *not* prefer the company of his own gender.

I pray here that you may take my none too subtle drift in order that I am not forced to elaborate further, as to do so not only contravene the law of the land but taxes my experience of such complex and, for me, unfathomable… *matters*.

Suffice it say, that he was Mediterranean of looks with eyes vivid and bright of intelligence. Noble, being the first word to spring to mind as an encapsulate. In fact, his features had always struck me as the features of an early Roman of the Equestrian Order. Aquiline and clean-cut despite his dark and sometimes brooding features. It coming as no surprise to any who knew him that, at any of the mixed gatherings at which he was so rarely inclined to appear, women gravitated in his direction from whatever of the two poles they were occupying at the time, just as though he possessed some magnetic attraction for the sex and they had no option but to seek him out.

And his reaction upon these occasions?

Why, he would bolt, of course.

And it was this aversion to the female of the species that leads us to his extraordinary end – if it be ended, that is.

An end which will be sure to be remembered by some of those who read of it; though to others whose recall of such events, of history even, is more… *ephemeral*… the machinations of countries and individuals that affected whole continents in the interval between his death and the present will have ensured that the peculiar circumstances of his last days will no longer be familiar.

Even if it did create a very considerable stir in Cairo and beyond at the time.

And yet, as is only natural, and when the missing man failed to return to his homeland, the nine days' wonder of his disappearance was forgotten in the excitement of some new story or another that held the public's fickle interest be it trite and meaningless or otherwise.

It is this story, with all the sensational events, including the perfidy and sexual cruelty of that sex he had until then managed to avoid, I shall endeavour to relate to you now.

Briefly, in order not to dwell on the preamble to the story and move events along; aware as I am of the deplorable falls in concentration levels of the reading public that makes them so quick to irritation and disinterest in general if their need for sensation is not instantly met; I shall precis by explaining that Perryman was recuperating at Cairo's Mena House – or Shepheard's, as it is more popularly known. Having landed up there after a rather severe illness in London his physician assured him would be better served by a spell in a dry climate rather than that of a winter bound London and the ever-present pea-soupers that had proved fatal for more than one consumptive and his weakened chest.

Finding the doctor's advice sound and feeling more himself after a few days free of cold and polluted fog, he had felt hemmed in and claustrophobic indoors. Thus, had Perryman decided to leave Mena House one evening for a stroll. Wearing a light dust-coat over his evening clothes to ward off the chill Cairo night, he had turned in the direction of the Great Pyramid.

And never returned.

No one has ever seen him since - or ever reported having seen him.

And now I tell you his story in its bald and sexually shocking entirety.

Though I add a proviso:

If the story I am about to impart to you is an elaborate hoax - perpetrated by Perryman himself, for some obscure reason while he remains in in hiding; or by another well enough acquainted with his handwriting to assimilate it - I do not profess to say.

Certainly, his description of the human-bondage befalling him at the hands, of all people, a woman - and a monstrous though, if he is to be believed, as I *do* believe, sensuous example of the gender he so despised before leaving – is plausible and written in a style those of us fortunate enough to have known him as well as he would allow have all agreed to be authentic.

Ultimately, however, the decision is yours.

Credulity or incredulity.

Belief or disbelief.

On that score I can be of no help to you save to publish what has been placed in my hands in the most accessible and truthful way.

That is one effort, at least, in which you may be assured no veracity has been spared.

As to how it came into my possession, however?

That may be told very briefly.

Two years after Perryman's disappearance I was in Cairo, and although I was not staying at Mena House I sometimes visited friends there. One night as I came out of the hotel to enter the car which was to drive me back to the Continental, a tall native, dressed in white and so muffled up that little more of his face than two gleaming eyes was visible, handed me a packet - a roll of paper, apparently - saluted me with extraordinary formality, and departed.

No one else seemed to have noticed the man, although the chauffeur, of course, was nearly as close to him as I was, and a servant from the hotel had followed me out and down the steps. Something I recall being intrigued by at the time, and even more later. At that point, though, I simply stood there in the dusk, staring at the packet in my hand. Only then, after the tall figure vanished - already swallowed up in the shadow of the road – did I react. naturally assuming that the man had made some mistake.

It wasn't until some moments later that I held the package near the lamp of the car and examined it closely.

It was a roll of some kind of parchment, tied with a fragment of thin string, and upon the otherwise blank outside page my name was written very distinctly!

No mistake.

I entered the car, rather dazed by the occurrence, which presented several extraordinary features, and, unfastening the string, began to read.

It was only then, and with real earnest, that I thought I must be dreaming.

Since I shall supply the whole of the manuscript for perusal shortly, I will make no further reference to the contents here, but will content myself with mentioning that it was written with a dark-brown ink and – shockingly to me at the time, and even in a more diluted fashion now – to discover it was the familiar hand of Benedict Perryman upon which my disbelieving eyes were fixated.

His unmistakable scrawl covered some kind of parchment or papyrus whose provenance has since defied three different experts to whom I have shown it, but which, in short, is of unknown manufacture.

The twine with which it was tied proved to be of finely plaited reed and was, though uncommon, more readily recognisable.

But to return to the text itself:

That part of Perryman's narrative, if the following amazing statement is really the work of Perryman, as I and my colleagues believe it to be – that part which deals with events up to the time that he left both Mena House *and* the world, I have been able to check. The dragoman, Hassan Abd-el-Kebîr, was still practising his profession of interpreter at Mena House during the time of my visit, and he confirmed the truth of Perryman's story in regard to the heart of lapis-lazuli - which he had seen and you will soon learn of.

He also knew of the meeting with the woman in the Mûski.

This last something Perryman himself had spoken of to him.

For the rest, the manuscript shall tell my former friend's story without my aid...

Arthur Maitland
Fleet Street
November 1910

ONE

The Manuscript

Two years have elapsed since I quitted the world and, having been advised of the presence in Egypt of a one-time colleague for whom I have much regard, prompts me to put on record these particulars of, perhaps, the strangest, most humbling, and most humiliating experience surely to ever have ever befallen any man, anywhere.

I state from the outset that I do not expect my story to be believed. The scepticism of the material world of Fleet Street, of which I of all people must be only too keenly aware, will consume my statement with its cynical and devouring fires. But I do not care.

The old itching to make a "story" – despite the anguish its telling causes its author - is upon me.

And so we begin:

Where the experience actually began, I must leave to each reader to judge for himself. I, personally, do not profess to know, even now. But the curtain first arose upon that part of the story which it is my present purpose to chronicle one afternoon near the corner of the Street of the Silversmiths in Cairo. I was wandering in those wonderful narrow, winding lanes, unaccompanied, for I am by habit a solitary being; but, despite my ignorance of the language and customs of the natives, I awakened to the fact that a link of sympathy - of silent understanding, if you will - seemed to bind me to these busy brown men.

Though I will add, for those reading this who know me and would find it scarcely credible for me to omit such a personal truth, that it was the men *alone* who excited my empathy upon this day. For, and I allow the individual to judge whether rightly or wrongly, the female of our had always – and certainly to this point – left me unmoved and, in most of my admittedly interactions with them, in a condition of some exasperation. I am, or so I am informed, for such considerations mean next to nothing to me when placed next to the three pillars I had made of my life – truth, learning, and curiosity – of a kind women find physically attractive. A gift from nature; though the behaviour it has inspired towards me from the fair sex down the years has ensured I look upon this so-called boon a burden; that has not only won me much in the way of female attention but also enmity when that attention has been – gently and with diplomacy, I assure you – spurned.

But back to my tale…

I had for many years cherished a secret ambition to pay a protracted visit to Egypt, but the ties of an arduous profession had until now rendered its realisation impossible. Now, however, a stranger in a strange land, I found myself at home. Feeling, and for the first time, as if I actually belonged in my surroundings.

I cannot hope to make evident to those who will read the completeness of this recognition.

Despite the fact not all of my long dreamed of land thrilled my somewhat insular soul.

From Shepheard's, with its throngs of cosmopolitan travellers and its hosts of pretty women, I had early fled in dismay to the comparative quiet of Mena House. But the real happiness I found – which I soon realised from my own previously unfelt euphoria, was most likely the *first* I had ever known - I found among the discordant cries and mingled smells of perfume and decay in the native city. The desert called to me sweetly, but it was the people, the shops, the shuttered houses, the noise and the smells of the Eastern streets which gripped my heart. As if a siren's song had called to me that I might visit the land from whence it sang to be… *reborn!*

Delightedly, I watched the passage of those commercial vehicles, narrow and set high upon monstrous wheels, as they conveyed goods of indescribable variety along streets no wider than the *"hall"* of a small suburban residence.

The Parsees in the Khân Khalîl with their carpets and shining silk-ware, the Arab dealers, fierce swarthy tradesmen from the desert, and the smooth-tongued Cairenes upholding embroidered cloths and gauzy yashmaks to allure the eye.

All of these above I watched with a kind of gladness that was almost tender, that was unlike any sentiment I had ever experienced toward my fellow-creatures before.

A *"gladness"* that was tainted only by the unavoidable – this was a market, you might remember – presence of titters, giggles, and lewd looks of the females in amongst the men and, sometimes with them. Titters, giggles, and *knowing* looks that were all aimed in my direction.

Here, I ask your forgiveness if I sound self-absorbed, for such is most certainly not my intention and will prove, for those of you who stay with my story until its conclusion, a claim fully vindicated.

Again, I continue:

Mendicants crying the eternal *"Bakshîsh!"*, Sakhas with their skins of Nile water, and the other hundred and one familiar figures of the quarter filled me with a great and glad contentment so that when I returned to my rooms after a hearty meal I attacked with a gusto sadly lacking in me of late, I immediately retired and, with a sense of well-being and contentment, fell instantly to an untroubled sleep.

In such an unaccustomed and lighthearted frame of mind, I think I can be forgiven for not suspecting my new and most welcome mindset was not about to last.

Though I *know* those reading will agree there was no possibility – even had I suspected my stay was to turn sour – of my having any conception of the events, and those populating it, contributing to the… *curdling*.

Contrary to local custom, I purposely haunted the Mûski during the heat of the day.

Can you guess at my reasoning?

Yes.

You are correct.

For it was during these hours that it was comparatively free from the presence of tiresome Europeans and even more intrusive Americans; all of whom seemed to think they shared a brotherhood with a complete stranger simply because of the accident of a shared skin-tone.

Thus it was, upon the occasion of which I write, that as I was coming to the end of the street in which the shops of the principal silversmiths are situated, I found myself to be the only white man (if I except the Greeks) in the immediate neighbourhood.

A group of local men hurrying out of the street as I approached it first attracted my attention. They were glancing behind them apprehensively as though at a rabid dog. Then came a white-bearded man riding a tiny donkey, glancing back apprehensively over his shoulder as if he had short-changed Charon himself after bribing Hades' boatmen to ferry him back to the world above. He all but collided with me in his blind haste; and, stepping quickly aside to avoid him, the calamity that would begin my adventure struck.

I knocked down a woman who was coming up from behind him.

Of course, the old man whose haste and unexplained anxiety had been the real cause of the accident rode off at headlong speed and I found myself left with the poor victim of my provoked clumsiness.

And in a stretch upon that busy street, I suddenly realised with much amazement, which seemed miraculously to have become deserted.

And I mean *empty!*

If the shopkeepers remained in their shops, they were invisible, and must have retreated into the darkest corners of the caves in the wall which constitute native emporiums.

Pedestrians and browsing shoppers there were none.

Only my concern for the woman – and yes, my thoughts cursed the fates that had made impish judgement on the fifty-fifty verdict – prevented me from considering this… *emptying*… at greater length and I stooped to help her as she lay in uncomplaining silence – though her tumble had been heavy – at my feet.

Which was the exact moment I felt it for the first time in my life to that point.

Terror.

Pure and horrifically simple.

There is no other way to describe the sensations of loathing, repulsion, and, worse, sense of powerlessness that surged inside me as a face, freed by the fall from the covering hood of its djellaba, and savage in its physical and spiritual ugliness, held itself up to mine.

Never, in the whole of my career as a journalist, had I seen a face as capable of inspiring the cocktail of fear and misgiving I felt at that moment.

A black veil, which she wore beneath the hood, had also been torn from its brass fastenings as she fell to reveal her countenance in all its savagery. A face that looked both *at* me and *in* me and seemed satisfied at what it saw. It was, at one and the same time, a predatory and avian looking face that, in tandem with its surprisingly clear and unmarked skin and the firmness of the body I sensed below it, appeared to be in its middle-thirties but gave the impossible impression of belonging to a woman who had miraculously survived the ravages of disease and subsequent death for several centuries!

My fanciful impression, if that is how you are describing it, would soon be proved anything but.

With its scimitar nose and the vivid sharpness of its startlingly blue eyes, it was a face that, in a past English age, would have had the Witch-Finder-General salivating at the prospect of consigning yet another demonic soul to the eternal fires from which it had sprang.

Involuntarily and, I am sure you would agree, quite understandably, had you been the one to witness such a face at first hand, I shrank back from her.

A shrinking from her she did not miss.

If anything, the light of evil intent in those piercing eyes grew stronger and, to my amazement, I found myself with a weakness at the knees such as I had not experienced since the playground bully had last sought me out for his pugilistic attentions.

Those who knew me in my former life, will bear testimony to the fact that I was not an emotional man or one made readily impressionable by any kind of human appeal; but I think they will agree also that I was not a man beyond the showing of simple compassion for a person in suffering. More so, when that suffering was born of my own ignorance or, in this case, carelessness. I was not so elevated from human commerce to withdraw myself from any form of discomfort for which I might be held culpable. Was not my diplomacy and tact when refusing the attentions of those women who wished to know me more… *intimately*… not evidence of this?

But this woman…?

Well, this woman I had accidentally knocked to her back upon that dusty market street inspired no feeling of either regret or compassion for my actions.

I simply wished to take off with all the speed a maintaining of dignity for a man in my position allowed.

Making my retreat without even bothering to help the woman to her feet.

And would have done so had I not found I could make no move away.

My feet were rooted to that dusty street as if I were a Sant tree planted there by an early Pharaoh.

I simply could not move!

And then I could.

Stooping, I took her hand and gently raised her from the ground, a distant voice in my head proclaiming itself surprised, having initially believed her to be somewhat scrawny, by just how… *substantial*… the weight of her felt.

But no more surprised than I was by what I did next.

When she had found her feet, I did *not* release her hand, apologise, and make my exit.

No.

What I did instead, was to transfer my grip from her palm to that of her long fingers and turn the hand over that I may…

I pause a moment as my recollection of that first incident discomposes me whenever I reflect upon it.

Decidedly so, given it was the beginning of my… *fall*.

As if I acted at the behest of another, I turned that hand over that I might place my lips upon the back of it.

And not in the way of a suitor with a woman to whom he wished to declare his interest.

That, as distasteful as such a prospect would have been, I should have found infinitely more preferable than the idea the act instilled upon my senses.

For all the world, it seemed as if my kissing the back of that hand was an act of intent on my part to…

It will sound ludicrous to you in your cosseted and civilised London lodgings, I know.

But…

But it felt as if I were performing an act of intent that committed myself to her… *service*.

I record the fact, but even now, looking back upon its happening, and seeking to recapture the cold, solitary, and fiercely independent, Benedict Perryman who has now left the world he once knew, I realise the wonder of it.

That I should have given rein to such an impulse!

And to have that impulse stir me!

For that, I am ashamed to say, is exactly the effect my lips upon the back of this savage and terrifying woman's hand had upon me. An effect which (avert your eyes from now on, all of you who happen to be reading this unused to seeing intimate descriptions of either the male or the female body and those acts of sexual intimacy these same bodies can sometimes indulge in) seemed to galvanise my every nerve end and resulted in a most monstrous tumescence that left me on the verge of feeling light-headed.

Loathe to admit it as I was, even as my simple contact with her triggered my body into the most amazing and thoroughly untoward response, that the creature before me had put my senses in state of rut, I could do no other than acknowledge the inexplicable.

But by far the more disturbing realisation came with the knowledge that, as my lips made contact with her most un-witch-like flesh, I wished for nothing more at that moment than to…

Forgive me for just a few seconds.

…to… To… *submit*… to her.

It was an insidious sensation wholly new to me and, though I was not unfamiliar with *certain* men who found pleasure in paying women of a certain *kind* to enact such fantasies, was also totally alien to both my temperament and my moral make-up.

Neither barrier preventing that sensation overcoming my reservations to thrill my nerve-ends with nervous and sexual energy that was both euphoric and weakening at the same time.

As to which of the two phenomena was the more remarkable?

The initial offer of kindness towards a woman who inspired nothing of the kind in me – an offer I would later realise I has somehow been compelled to make?

Or the inescapable dread inspired by the fact that, when my lips made contact with the back of that hand, an interior voice I recognised as mine but seemed to come from some alien source inside my own head referred to her as *"Master"*?

I ask you: in my situation, which would you have found the more remarkable?

Anyhow, the result of my first act - regretted as soon as performed – had led to the even more unsought second.

And led to something equally as remarkable.

If not more so.

When I suddenly felt free to raise my head from her hand – almost as if I had been given some unspoken permission - the savage and predatory features of the creature I had just helped from the floor took on an expression that almost lent comeliness to her angular and cruel physiognomy.

Though still savage and frightful, no longer did she appear the wholly unattractive Egyptian female my first thoughts had described her as being. In fact, the sharp and curving nose, pronounced cheekbones below piercing and discomfiting eyes and the cruel set of lips that, like mine, gave every impression on *never* having been kissed – the same features I had found so appalling not moments before – were inspiring a quite different response from me.

But, if such a sight and a response were not enough to imprint itself upon my memory, there was something else intermingled with her facial… *softening*.

Something as warped and evil as time itself that, as if reading my unwanted interior dialogue of a few moments before, was already proclaiming itself as my *"Master"*.

As I stared into her eyes and felt compelled to *not* break contact, my thoughts were racing, grasping for any explanation that would explain the experience I was undergoing; finally landing upon my recent ill-health and the medication treating it for my embarrassing and thoroughly uncharacteristic reaction to the woman in whose gaze I suddenly felt I was losing myself.

And then, miraculously, I was released.

With some words in Arabic that were beyond my acquaintance with her tongue, she suddenly made off along the deserted street.

Unhurried and, despite that face I could do no more than confess, *regal*.

The street before her as empty of people before her progress as the channel allowing Moses to free his people was empty of water.

Progress and departure that left me rooted to the spot and, I exaggerate not, in the same cold sweat of fear the drums of an approaching army must inspire in the vastly inferior force awaiting their own inevitable and bloody massacre.

And yet, when I finally regained enough of my senses to look about me with a cognisant eye, I saw that the episode had passed unnoticed and the street had returned once again to that mix of bustle, hubbub, and haggling, that was the staple of Egyptian commerce.

Certainly, if anyone witnessed the incident he was either well concealed or chose to hide all knowledge of it.

Which was when, conscious of an all but emasculating embarrassment, into which were mingled other tumultuous emotions, I turned out of the Street of the Silversmiths and found myself amid the normal activities of the quarter again.

The memory of the Kiss I had placed upon her hand – and seemingly voluntarily - was repugnant to me and, without exaggeration I had the desire of wishing to be cleansed in some way or other; despite having yet to find the call to one or other of the multitudinous religions in which people took solace.

But it was by far the other desire running alongside that of wishing to purge my lips in Holy Water that troubled me most.

A desire that was almost a yearning to not only see that savage face again, but…

I was shaking as my inner honesty made me follow the thought through.

A desire not just to see her again but to… but to serve.

Using my handkerchief to mop a brow covered in perspiration that was, for once, not a consequence of the searing heat, I found that for the first time in my life I desired to find myself among normal, healthy, moderately brainless Europeans.

Of a sudden, I longed for the smell of cigar-smoke, for the rattle of the cocktail-maker, and previously hateful sound of small-talk and meaningless conversation.

You may take it as read that my retreat to Shepheard's was a hurried one.

Two

The same night, after dinner, I walked out of Mena House to look for Hassan Abd-el-Kebîr, the dragoman with whom I had contracted for a journey, by camel, to Sakhâra on the following day.

He had promised to attend at half-past eight in order to arrange the time of starting in the morning, together with some other details.

But I failed to find him.

He was not among the other members of his calling other natives seated outside the hotel and, to kill time, I strolled leisurely down the road toward the electric-tram terminus. The dry and still night air was soothing and the unnerving incident earlier in the day had been somewhat lessened in its impact upon me by the intervening hours. Hours that had included a most acceptable meal in the company of a not altogether stupid Civil Servant who had been seconded to the service of the Ambassador at our Cairo Embassy.

The three unheard of glasses containing tipples of the finest single-Malt held in Shepheard's cellar helping to supply an altogether welcome numbing also.

I had taken no more than ten paces, I suppose, when a tall native, muffled to the tip of his nose in white and wearing a white turban, appeared out of the darkness beside me, thrust a small package into my hand.

Then, as I stood dumbfound, too shocked to either move or call after him, and with a look upon his face that seemed singularly like pity, he bowed and departed.

He was soon lost to my eyes as I remained motionless clutching the item he had delivered me, still too surprised to react as, with a sense of oncoming dread, I wondered if what he had delivered and I was holding was connected to my incident earlier in the day in the Street of Silversmiths.

Volition suddenly returned to me as I remained standing there in the road, I held up my hand and stared at the little package stupidly; as if I could divine its contents through the wrapping concealing it, rather than simply remove the wrapping and know for certain.

Sense eventually prevailed.

Wrapping dispensed with, I saw its contents consisted of a piece of fine white silk fastened about some small, hard object.

My again set to warning-mode nerves calmed at this.

Evidently, I thought, there had been a mistake.

"White silk?"

There could be no possibility the package had been intended for me.

The incident, just the same, and erroneous or not, had ruined my only recently restored mood and I retraced my steps back to the hotel to stand under a lamp near its entrance and scrutinise the object mistakenly placed in my hands with more deliberation.

The first thing to strike me as I unfastened the silk was its perfumed aroma. A scent that was both pungent and yet… *delicate*. Its contents were a piece of lapis-lazuli carved in the form of a heart, beautifully mounted in gold and bearing three Arabic letters, inlaid in some way.

Also in gold!

At this singular ornament, I stared harder than ever.

Certainly, the muffled and sympathetic looking native had made a strange mistake.

Of that I was in absolutely no doubt and was also reassured this incident was not connected to my earlier encounter in the market either.

Or so my thoughts ran.

What I held in my had was, I knew, despite being a novice when it came to such things, a love-token.

Which meant - and emphatically so – that it was not for me!

It then, as I was standing there lost in the wonderment of my scrutiny, the heart of lapis-lazuli in my palm, when the voice of Hassan disturbed my stupor:

“Ah, my gentleman, I am sorry to be late but…”

The voice ceased and I looked up.

“Well?” I said, a trifle impatiently, not used to such incidents in my life – and certainly not one after the other.

“Have you a problem, Hassan?”

Then I, too, said no more.

Hassan Abd-el-Kebîr was glaring at the ornament in my hand as though I had held, not a very choice example of native jewellery, but an adder or a scorpion!

“What’s the matter?” I asked, recovering from my surprise. “Do you know to whom this amulet belongs?”

He muttered something in guttural Arabic ere replying to my question.

Then:

“It is the heart of lapis,” he said, in a strange voice. “It is the heart of lapis!”

“So much is evident,” I cried, finding myself laughing at this obvious distress for some reason. “But why does it seem to alarm you so?”

“Please,” he said softly, and held out a brown hand. “I will see.”

I placed the thing in his open palm and he gazed at it as one might imagine an orchid hunter would gaze at a new species of Odontoglossum.

“What does the Arabic mean?” I asked.

“In English, the numerals mean one-thousand,” he replied.

I waited, expecting him to be more forthcoming, but he simply stared at the amulet in his hand with a concentration that bordered on reverence and which, would discover later, not only bordered upon it.

“Well?”

Hassan returned the ornament to me, and his expression was so strange that I began to grow really annoyed.

He was looking at me with a mingling of compassion and… *contempt*… which I found to be quite insufferable.

“Hassan,” I said sternly, “you will tell me all you know about this matter. One would imagine that you suspected me of stealing the thing!”

“Ah, no, my gentleman!” he protested earnestly, contempt replaced by that servile fawning Europeans had come to expect from Egyptians of his ilk who made a living from their inability – or unwillingness – to fend for themselves in his mother-tongue.

He seemed reluctant but, no doubt with his livelihood in mind, for one word of complaint from me or any other guest to the management of Shepheard’s would see him struck from their list of reliable and trustworthy Dragomen, he caved in to my demand for the information he obviously held in regard of the amulet.

“Yes, my gentleman. Of course, I will tell you. But know this. If I do, you will not believe me.”

I nodded, only too familiar with his kind’s penchant for myths and wives’ tales masquerading as truth and the embarrassment they felt by their European employers for believing them – let alone having to relate the belief in question whilst in the presence of one of those employers.

“Never mind, Hassan. I will not judge you. Just tell me what you know and I give you my solemn presence to never mention it again to either you or anyone at the hotel.”

Thereupon Hassan Abd-el-Kebîr told me the most improbable story to which I had ever listened.

Since to reproduce it in his imperfect English, and with my own frequent interjections, would be tedious, I will give it – I true journalistic fashion - in brief. Some of the historical details, imperfectly related by Hassan as I learned later, I have corrected. Other than that, all is as he told me…

…In the reign of the Khalîf El-Mamûn - a son of Hárûn er-Rashîd and brother of the prototype of Beckford's Vathek - one Shâwar was Governor of Egypt, and the daughter of the Governor, Scheherazade, was famed throughout the domains of the Khalîf as the most beautiful maiden in the land.

Wazîrs and princes sought her hand in vain.

Her heart, though, was given to a handsome young merchant of Cairo, Ahmad er-Mâdi, who was also the wealthiest man in the city.

Shâwar, although an indulgent father, would not hear of such a union, however, but he hesitated to destroy his daughter's happiness by forcing her into an unwelcome marriage.

Finally, passion conquered reason in the breasts of the lovers and they fled, Scheherazade escaping from the palace of her father by means of a rope-ladder smuggled into the harêm apartments by a slave whom Ahmad's gold had tempted, and meeting Ahmad outside the gardens where he waited with a fleet horse.

Even the guard at the city gate had been bought by the wealthy merchant, and the pair succeeded in escaping from Cairo.

The extensive possessions of Ahmad were confiscated by the enraged father and a sentence of death was passed upon the absent man - to be instantly put into execution in the event of his arrest anywhere within the domain of the Khalîf.

Exiled in a distant oasis, the Sheikh of which was bound to Ahmad by ties of ancient friendship, the prospect which had once seemed so alluring to Scheherazade became clouded.

Recognising this change in her attitude, Ahmad er-Mâdi racked his brains for some scheme whereby he might recover his lost wealth and surround his beautiful wife with the luxury to which she had been accustomed.

In this extremity, he had recourse to a certain recluse who resided in a solitary spot in the desert, far from the haunts of men and who was widely credited with magical powers.

It was a whole week's journey to the abode of the wizard and, unknown to Ahmad, during his absence a son of the Khalîf, visiting Egypt, chanced to lose his way on a hunting expedition, and came upon the secret oasis in which Scheherazade was hiding.

Moreover, this prince had been one of her most persistent suitors.

The ancient magician consented to receive Ahmad, and the first boon which the enamoured young man craved of him was that he might grant him a sight of Scheherazade.

The student of dark arts consented and bid Ahmad to look into a mirror.

Burning the secret perfumes and uttering prescribed incantation, the surface of the mirror began to change.

At first mistily, and then quite clearly, Ahmad saw Scheherazade, standing in the moonlight beneath a tall palm tree - her lips teased by those of her former suitor!

And, as if to cut still more deeply into the heart of the unfortunate Ahmad, the lips in question did not belong on her most beauteous face.

At that the world grew black before the eyes of Ahmad and he - he who had come a long and arduous journey at the behest of love - now experienced an equally passionate and vengeful hatred.

Acquainting the magician with what he had seen, he demanded that he should exercise his art in visiting upon the false Scheherazade the most terrible curse that it lay within his power to invoke!

The learned man refused; whereupon Ahmad, insane with sorrow and anger, drew his sword and gave the magician choice of compliance or instant death.

The threat sufficed.

The wizard performed a ghastly conjuration, calling down upon Scheherazade the curse of a physical and emotional ugliness which should remain with her not for the ordinary span of a lifetime but for incalculable years.

Years, during which she should continue to live in the flesh, loathed, despised, and feared by all!

"Until a certain chosen Infidel is found, she will remain in such a form," the magician explained, "and then only after she has received one-thousand kisses from men she has not coerced or paid into supplying them. An Infidel who can, after that one-thousandth kiss, be bound to her as a slave in both the practical and the metaphysical sense – the most abject of body-servants, if you will.

"Until that time, she will never regain her beauty again."

The exact text of the curse concluded with:

"And, even then, that beauty will only find itself restored after that Infidel body-servant has died a natural death in her service."

At the end of the curse and, in his guilt for having threatened him, for Ahmad was a good man and his goodness only temporarily blighted by the shock of his love betraying him, Ahmad had given the magician a plentiful amount of coin turned from him dispiritedly.

When he staggered out from the cavern, blinded by a hundred emotions and already sick with remorse; and after one night spent upon the return journey, Ahmad himself dropped dead from his saddle. Stricken by the malignant will of the awful being whose power he had forced to invoke and for which the magician, no matter the gift of coin, had not forgiven him! Ahmed was dead, but the curse he had forced was irrevocable..."

…I will conclude this wild romance in the words of Hassan, the dragoman, as nearly as I can recall them…

"…And so, Scheherazade," Hassan had told me in a voice hushed with awe and foreboding, "who had been stricken with age and ugliness in the very hour that the curse was spoken, went out into the world, my gentleman.

"She begged her way from place to place - for her body remained that of a highly… erotic… woman, even if her face had more in common with a vulture than one of her own sex - and as the years passed by accumulated much wealth in that manner.

"Finally, it is said, she returned to Cairo, her native city, and there remained, filling her coffers as she sought out the necessary kisses and searched for that one infidel who would bow before her power and commit his life to her service for so long as that life could be maintained.

"An Infidel who, when found, was to be sent a heart of lapis, that he might know he had been chosen. For upon the heart, engraved in gold, were the numerals declaring that final kiss had been given. And without either blackmail to coerce it or money exchanging hands.

Then, more gravely:

"It is said that this gift, once accepted, ensured that the Infidel to whom it was given became the chattel and slave of Scheherazade..."

…The thing was utterly incredible and I understand what you, my readers, must think as I recount such a fantastical tale to you.

In fact, I do believe I hear your thoughts as if you were here beside me at this moment:

"Another Englishman gone native"

"Too much sun and alcohol!"

"Merely an opportunistic Dragoman's attempt to extort money from yet another credulous tourist. No doubt ready to recommend another 'Magician' willing to lift the curse for a suitable sum!"

Believe me, you do not travel a route I did not take myself at the time.

I also regarded it – despite my earlier experience in the Street of Silversmiths – as no more than a picturesque example of Eastern imagination, designed simply to place either pounds of dollars in the coffers of an unscrupulous native.

Which is why, simply to see what effect it would have upon him, I told Hassan about the incident in the Mûski.

His face as I told him could not have been reproduced by the most talented and truthful of actors since Garrick last trod the boards.

In fact, at no time before or since have I seen a face as fearful as the one Hassan turned upon me after my description of the woman whose hand I had kissed.

Neither did I miss the return of that contempt I had earlier noted as being written across his features - nor find myself unable to guess at its cause.

In Hassan's eyes, I was no longer the superior Infidel whose money provided his livelihood – or at least a part of it.

To my Dragoman I had just become the lowest of all living creatures in the Arab world.

The slave and chattel of a woman.

"It was she - Scheherazade," he said fearfully, making no attempt now to hide that contempt; convinced as he was that my status had been… *reduced*.

He shook his head solemnly, as if what he was about to tell me could not be refuted.

"She was marking you."

He drew himself up, suddenly superior:

"And now you have been claimed."

"Don't be childish, Hassan," I chided him, my inner-self feeling nowhere close to contained as I attempted to save face before him; something deep in my gut telling me I had stumbled across and into something that no Western sense of security or patronising superiority could supply an answer. "You are too old to believe in myth and fairy-tale."

Sympathy mingled with the fear and contempt now.

"It was the last kiss," he told me

My eyes questioned him and he finished:

“The last of the thousand kisses required before she placed in your possession the amulet that has, in turn, placed you in hers.”

His solemn eyes held mine:

“The kiss you placed upon her hand, under your own free will and for no offer of reward, has made you her slave.”

THREE

For all my misgivings and the unease which now hang over me like a pall, I managed to return the few paces to the hotel and found myself, genuinely, pleased to see my Civil-Servant companion at dinner propping up the colonial style bar.

I joined him.

The best part of a bottle of 1889 Laphroaig later, I was more than ready for bed and benumbed enough to actually slumber, rather than stare at the ceiling while chiding myself for believing such infantile rubbish. This while, at the same time, feeling a premonition of disaster goose-bump the back of neck I found impossible to shake. Though, and even benumbed, it took a time before anaesthetic sleep claimed me.

Just the same, eventual slumber or not, I was not at my best the following day for the expedition to Sakhâra; which did not prevent me from noting that Hassan was covertly watching me.

And with an expression that annoyed me intensely.

It was that compound of compassion and resignation which one might bestow upon a condemned man.

Accompanied by that confounded look of contempt, as if I had somehow become something… *less*… than him.

Annoyed enough to charged him with it, he of course denied any such sentiment.

I remained unconvinced and, feeling petulant, decided he would not be receiving as much of money as he thought.

We would see how… *superior*… he felt when his pockets were not as overburdened with the shillings he thoroughly expected me to hand over!

Reduced shillings or not, I knew that he entertained such feelings in my regard and, what was worse, I began, and at an uncomfortable degree, to share them with him – even if I wasn't (how could I be?) totally convinced of his infantile suspicions.

For me, as much as his kind, the prospect of being a woman's servant – let alone a *"slave"* was not a position of honour.

Though it certainly bestowed upon the man labouring under the title a much-deserved shame.

More so in this part of the world.

And yet, for all my attempts to clutch at it and pretend that what I was experiencing was something other than my instincts assured it to be, I could feel the normal world slipping from under my feet.

The more I caught Hassan staring at me with that mix of pity and contempt the less my attempts to clutch at modernity sustained me. More and more, when free of the false visions of alcohol, anyway, I was beginning to feel as if fate were indeed fashioning a noose for my neck. Though, if Hassan were correct, it would be less noose than yoke.

And its designer would be a woman.

I suddenly knew, on that journey to Sakhâra, that what was about to happen to me had been pre-ordained by fate. I knew it, truly knew, deep in the bowels of my soul and beyond any shade of doubt, that something tremendous, inevitable, and ultimate was about to happen to me.

Something I knew with certainty, as I recalled the unmanning sensations buckling my legs as my lips had made contact with the savage looking woman's hand only a day before, would be humbling to my sense of self-worth and utterly emasculating.

And then, even as I had this less than life-affirming thought, and as if to underline my coming subjugation,

I caught myself unconsciously, shockingly, raising the heart of lapis-lazuli to my lips!

But why I did so I had no idea.

In the space of a short journey for some sightseeing, and then back; I seemed to have lost identity.

In short, and with no attempt to over-dramatize, I no longer knew myself.

*****

When Hassan parted from me at Mena House that evening upon our return, he could not disguise the fact that he regarded the parting as final.

Despite the fact he knew my plans were made for several weeks ahead.

Nor did I quarrel with the man's curious attitude.

For by this time, and as lunatic as those of you reading this must surely regard my collapse, I regarded the parting as final also.

In a word, I was becoming reconciled.

To…

To something.

As I write this, I realise it is difficult, all but impossible, to render in words such a frame of mind as mine at the point of time I describe so as to make them… *comprehensible*; therefore, I shall not even attempt the task, but leave the events of the night to speak for themselves.

After dinner, and avoiding a particularly persistent and very pretty widow who was waiting to waylay me in the lounge, I came out of the hotel and strolled along in the direction of the Pyramid.

On my way, I looked back once in order to bid a silent farewell to Mena House! Then I took out the heart of lapis-lazuli from my pocket and kissed it rapturously Kissed it as I had never kissed any object or any person in the whole course of my life!

And on *none* of the above counts did so I have any idea of why I was acting as I was.

All who read my story will be prepared to learn that in this placid and apparently feeble frame of mind I allowed myself to slip from the world – a coward's way of avoiding what I am sure most of you reading consider a most fanciful fate and believe could never possibly have happened anyway.

It was not so.

The modern man, the Benedict Constant Perryman once known in Fleet Street, came to life again for one terrible, strenuous moment ... and then passed out of life for ever.

As you will see…

Just before I reached the Pyramid, and at a lonely spot in the path - for this was not a "Sphinx and Pyramid night" - that is to say, the moon was not at the full and the tourists who flocked to such evenings were entirely absent – a tall and muffled native appeared at my elbow.

Unless he had a double or an identical twin, I felt certain that this was the same man who had brought me the heart of lapis-lazuli.

He touched me lightly on the arm and was not at all by the flash of annoyance with which I greeted his impertinence.

"Follow," he said in English, pointing ahead into the darkness below the plateau before moving off, completely convinced, it seemed that I would obey his order.

Obviously, he was in receipt of knowledge that had been denied me, for I moved off obediently, as if I were not only in thrall to some Arabic legend and the monstrous woman at its heart but, and increasingly, to all those of Arab origin also.

Then - suddenly, swiftly, came revolt.

The modern and highly individual man within me flared into angry life at the level of disrespect being shown me.

And not only as a visitor to a strange country.

His attitude towards me was an affront to my very masculinity.

I stopped dead and waited until he realised I was not turning and came about to face me.

“Who are you?” I demanded.

No answer was forthcoming and he simply stared back at me.

“Where are you leading me?” I cried, determined to persist until I received some satisfaction.

I received no reply and was about to step towards him to demand an answer when a silk scarf was slipped over my head by someone who, silently, must have been following me.

My hands immediately went to my face but I was unable to prevent the fabric from being drawn tied upon me.

Tight enough to prevent any loud outcry but not so as to endanger my breathing.

And then, though I would have been better served to have done so *before* the blindfold had been put in place, I fought like a madman.

I knew, and the knowledge appalled me, that I was fighting for my very life.

But not for my physical life.

No!

I was fighting for the right to live my life as a man; in absolutely no doubt now that, incredible or not, all that had happened to me until now was very real and, should I not effect an escape this instant, *very* lasting.

And my resistance to the fate assigned me was futile.

I am not a large man, but then neither am I small; but my size would have made little or no difference against the arms like bands of steel that grasped me. Whoever had me in their grasp was either a giant or incredibly strong. Likely both!

Within seconds, handled as if I were but a child in a fit of temper and feeling ashamed and powerless at the ease with which I was being mastered, I was lifted, bound, and then carried.

Carried to I knew not where.

I sensed myself being placed in some kind of a softly padded saddle, or, as I have since learned, into a shibrîyeh or covered litter on a camel’s back.

I soon felt the animal rise up to its full and ungainly height before moving off swiftly to our, as yet, unknown destination.

And then, perhaps equally as shame inducing as the effortless way in which I had been manhandled, the suddenness of my revolt left me and a kind of… dispirited resignation returned to claim me.

For all the fight left in me – and my honesty precludes me from pretending that I had put up much of a fight at all – my captors could have released me from my bonds that instant and would have received nothing in the way of trouble.

Restraints had become unnecessary.

My rebellion was ended.

Deep inside my head, from a place of which I had been in utter ignorance, let alone ever attempted to explore, a female voice spoke to my subconscious in words I could not understand but which were unmistakably of Arab origin.

A woman – *the* woman - was calling me and, no matter that her meaning was lost upon me, all my abject soul replied to her siren and authoritative call.

For hours it seemed, as the voice chanted at me hypnotically, echoing softly against the walls of my skull as if it were a lullaby designed to soothe a fretful and foreboding child, the camel raced ceaselessly on.

Absolute silence reigned about me except for that lullaby-like chanting and, had it not been for sheer discomfort of my position slung across the beast I should have drifted into the arms of Morpheus – so soporific was its effect.

Then, in the distance I heard voices, and felt the gait of the camel change.

Finally, the animal stood still and the chanting in my head was discontinued.

There came a word of guttural command in Arabic, and the camel dropped to its knees while I, pillowed among a pile of scented cushions, experienced no discomfort from what I knew from experience was usually a painful operation.

Within seconds, I was lifted out of my perfumed couch and set upon my feet. Allowed to stand freely for a while until the effects of remaining so long in a constrained position had worn off and the blood flowed into *all* my veins without restraint.

I was then led forward into some extensive building. Marble pavements were beneath my feet, fountains played, and the air was heavy with burning ambergris.

It was here that I was placed with my back to a pillar and bound.

Not harshly but not in a slapdash fashion that offered the possibility of my releasing myself anytime soon.

The silken hood about my head and effectively blindfolding me was then removed.

Squinting against the light of what appeared a thousand candles, I stared around me.

My breath caught in my throat.

Whatever my abject resignation had led me to expect, the scene greeting my eyes was not it.

There before me, as I stood helplessly restrained against a pillar, a magnificent Eastern apartment met my gaze!

A great hall, open on one side to the desert!

Out upon the sands, and by craning my head, I could see a group of men who had evidently been my captors and my guards; though the one who had unfastened the silk scarf I could not see as he was in the process of moving away behind the pillar to which I was bound.

But it was the sight waiting to greet me in the foreground of the apartment that paralysed my senses.

There, stretched upon a luxurious couch before me, was a woman.

A veiled woman.

A veiled woman who – even to me, a man renowned throughout Fleet Street as a dyed-in-the-wool misogynist – the woman's body was a thing of utter beauty.

No!

Nothing so… *lewd*… could ever be described by such a term.

All my former reticence, distaste, and pure irritation for members of the opposite gender vanished as mist must disperse before a hurricane force wind and, to my astonishment, I realised that my male member was arrowing upwards as if it had an appointment with the underside of my drooping chin itself.

An erection like none I had ever experienced before and seeming all the more powerful for it having been achieved without the merest hint of a suggestion or command from me, its owner.

An erection, you understand, that had nothing in common with the usual male desire to plunder and conquer the female object of desire.

This was something far less… *masculine*.

But no less potent.

The veiled woman rose from her couch and seemed to shimmy towards me, legs as powerful as any upon the belly-dancers my fellow hotel-guests had persuaded me to visit in their company after some drinks in the bar, shapely and well-defined, but evincing an air of power at the same time, seemed to progress towards me as if in a ballet; while a magnificent upper body - beneath material so fine and diaphanous she

might just as easily have been naked before both me and the men who had secured my captivity - kept her lower form company by way of the most delightful and erotic symmetry as my breathing became more ragged with each balletic step that fetched her closer. For her curves captivated the senses as well as the respiratory processes and, upon sight of her magnificent breasts beneath the gossamer chiffon of her apparel, just about all the reticence I had ever felt for the female sex vanished. Free standing and requiring no external support whatsoever of any kind, the engorged nipples I could see, apparently coloured with a dye of some kind, gave witness to her own appreciation of her captive.

So powerful was her allure, her face still withheld from me by the presence of the veil, that when she finally stood before me, close enough that I could see the sheen of her perspiration upon svelte tan flesh, my mouth was dry from anticipation and my tongue lolled from my head as though I were a canine seeking ventilation.

The sibilant but no less… *commanding*… voice that reached my ears spoke in English:

"And so, we find each other, my Infidel dog," began her first words to me, attaching to me from the very beginning the part I was expected to play in her life – and, if the legend held as told to me by Hassan spoke truly, until the last breath passed from my body.

"And such a handsome chattel you will make your mistress."

Her demeaning and disrespectful treatment of a stranger and a respectable man, somehow struck a chord with my former self and I struggled for a response.

The placing of one slender forefinger over my lips was enough to vanquish any such rebellion upon my part before it even took root.

"You must not utter words in the presence of your owner unless she expresses a desire to hear her dog speak."

And now my disgrace knew no bounds as, upon hearing this emasculating edict and hearing this Arab woman again describe me as if I were an animal she owned, the unthinkable happened and my body went into a spasm so intense that what cognitive ability available to me felt sure my spine must snap under the pressure placed upon it.

To my own gasps, the sound of her distant and decidedly unmusical laughter reverberated in my ears as my penis emptied the contents of heavy undercarriage beneath it into my underpants and my scream of anguished release joined her mocking hilarity.

Coming back to an earth that had re-made itself as my own personal desert of torture and torment, my head, cheeks burning with humiliation, lolled against my chest and I averted my eyes from the mockery and triumph I felt aimed at me from behind the veil behind which she sought refuge for her own… *infirmities*.

“There, there,” she soothed, in a voice, despite its sibilance, that ancient magician must have ensured took on a tone to match the features with which it had been cursed; a voice plainly unsuited to be… *pacifying*.

For I was convinced – and how could I not be? – that the vision in front of me was one and the same with creature in the covering Djellaba I had knocked to the ground in the bazaar.

“There must be no shame for paying such a tribute to the beauty of your owner,” she assured me. “You must exult in your service to me and make it the whole ambition of your worthless existence to bring me as much pleasure as a dog of your kind can.”

She laughed:

“At least until nature snuffs the life from you and that existence becomes of more meaning.”

She had no reason to explain further and seemed to expect that I would know enough of her legend to know her meaning and what she would say next if she spoke at all.

I was to remain at her side until I died; serving her in any manner of her choosing until my passing served to restore what had been taken from her those many centuries before.

“Believe me,” she said, finally thrusting the veil from her face to reveal those same savage and cruel features I had first seen the day before when the hood of her djellaba had slipped along with the veil itself during her tumble to the surface of that dusty street.

Glorious body, responsible for the greatest pleasure and the greatest ignominy I had known, or not, I was unable to prevent myself from flinching as that predatory and avian face, with its high cheekbones and scimitar nose, trained its equally cruel and vindictive eyes upon me.

Her answer was to stroke my own face.

“Do not worry, my obedient Infidel canine,” she mocked. “You will soon become used to this face of mine. In fact, you are already infatuated with the body below it and soon you will find yourself in heaven just to receive the hint of a smile from my accursed lips and anything approaching kindness from a tongue my swine of a former lover ensured would be equally as unappealing to the ears.”

With that, and as I looked on, shamed to my core and unable to prevent her even had I not been bound immobile to a pillar and with the presence of her servants nearby, she took a jewelled dagger from a table at her side her and began to cut the clothes I had ordered from Saville Row - expressly for my trip to her country - to shreds.

Within minutes it was I who stood before *her* naked.

Without even diaphanous chiffon to give me the illusion of decency.

And now I was the one under scrutiny.

And what a painstaking scrutiny it was.
A scrutiny that, unlike my earlier appraisal of her breathtaking form, that involved the prodding, pinching and squeezing of what seemed like every inch of my denuded form; including an inspection of my… *teeth*.

As if I were some thoroughbred she had purchased sight unseen and was only now able to partake of a fuller assessment.

Even my privates were not excluded and, so swiftly after my last disgrace or not, they soon declared themselves ready to be mocked once again for their lack of restraint.

Leaning in to me, so that horrendous visage was below my eyes and a thankfully sweet breath caressed the underside of my chin, she cupped my scrotum in her hand and smiled with pleasure at my reaction.

"That is a very good dog," she praised, as I flinched from her touch but made no futile attempt to otherwise avoid her – though my heart beat in my chest as if it must burst forth from it and attempt to confront her upon its own. "In time, you will learn to take pleasure from the smallest attention and affection your owner gives you. From now until your miserable existence ends, and my face is restored to its former beauty, you will be at my side in whatever capacity I choose, be it lackey, body-servant, or a pet for my amusement."

What spirit inside me I had remaining quailed at her words and, yet, thrilled to them at one and the same time. Already I was visualising myself with my mouth pressed against her heels, prior to my tongue worshipping the long and painted toes I could see below me. The horror of her face forgotten as I visualised myself at those *other* lips her suitor had revered so many centuries before; this as the man who had given up everything he had for her watched his betrayal from a magician's tent.

As the lord above, in whom I have recently come to believe, is my witness, I wished for nothing more right then than to serve her and prove useful that I may, once again, experience the release she had provided me only minutes before, and with no effort upon her part required.

I was hers in any way she wanted me, and the horror of that face when compared to the body beneath it could never be enough to dissipate the pure, unholy, and all-consuming need I now felt for the she-devil who had me in her toils.

As if knowing my thoughts, she used the knife to sever the scarves binding me to the pillar and took a step back that I might do *exactly* what she expected I would.

As my knees gave way beneath me and I sank to the floor at her feet, I clutched at her ankles as if they were lifebelts in a hostile sea and began to smother them with kisses of the most servile and abject devotion.

That final and unsought *"Kiss of Evil"*, the same kiss that had sealed my fate upon the Street of Silversmiths, was no more than a footnote to my bondage now and, as the vault holding the latent masochism my pride had expressed as misogyny was blown

asunder, I allowed my tongue to slather over the perfumed and salty flesh of the female I now acknowledged as my owner.
Lookin up, I could see her with hands upon hips imperiously and, though how I cannot say, I realised with a feeling of elation and pride that my submission was pleasing to her.

As my tongue began to bathe the crevices between her toes I acknowledged what was now no more than the simple truth:

I had found both my master *and* my spiritual home.

AFTERWORD

I chose to end Perryman's journal at this point for two reasons.

The first was that, though he went on at length about the nature of the *"abjectly demeaning"* services required of him by the female he insisted had come to own him, I was not of a mind to publish descriptions of acts even more foul and offensive than those described above. I realise that, as the year containing 1913 closes, sensibilities are no longer as easily shocked as perhaps they once were, but you must trust to my instincts upon this and accept that what you will have been allowed to read had I decided otherwise would have been likely to have you pointing a finger at me for being a reprobate and pervert in publishing it at all.

You may call me fainthearted, by all means, but it is my decision to make and, having made it, I feel no regret.

Far better to leave Perryman's fate to the suspicions of your imaginations and leave myself free of the hate and notoriety my simple wish to publish a journal of interest the man had expressly asked to be placed in my possession after his mistress, confident there could be no adverse consequences for her, gave permission for him to write it and have it delivered to that same Shepheard's from whence his adventure – emasculation if you prefer - began.

My second reason for ending his journal when there is so much left to publish is based on purely compassionate grounds.

For, though Perryman himself is unheeding of either his reputation or the hurt feelings of those who harboured respect for his talents as a journalist and his qualities as a man alongside them – and your editor one of their number, I hasten to add; I, however, do not labour under the curse of some unholy bondage and am not so far from home and beyond hope of ever reaching it again that the opinion of my former friends and readers has become meaningless to me.

What is published is more than enough, and for those amongst you – and I suspect there will be many – who find themselves… *titillated*… by the more deplorable aspects of male-female relationships, suffice it to say that Perryman's journal has been donated for perusal to the Reading-Room of the British Museum Library.

And with a strong recommendation that the character of any man or woman wishing to explore it further is looked at *most* closely before permission to read it be granted.

My own recommendation to those would-be readers is as follows:

"Read with care!"

THE END