The Dance of the Veils Revisited

Female-Led Dominance and Erotica

By
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INTRODUCTION

Looking back to my time as a little girl, growing up in a tiny village in the foothills leading to the Mont St Victoire, I realise that the darkness keeping me such imaginative company in the present was no less vibrant in my unformed past; a *darkness*, I firmly believe, brought about by the advanced reading age that led me (when I could access them at such an age) to those titles of a more adult nature.

Not pornographic, I hasten to add as, without being judgmental, such material is of little or no interest to me.

No, my adolescent interest was piqued by titles from writers as diverse as Dumas and Hugo to Rachilde and Pierre Louys; each of whom could be guaranteed – if only in miniature in the case of the former duo – to populate their tales with a strong female character – characters such as "Milady" in the case of Dumas Pere and his Three Musketeers, together with La Marquise de Sade from the pen of the precocious Rachilde.

Thus was my interest in reading stories with a strong commanding heroine born and, those stories being few and far between, my re-imagining of many such tales from a female-led, so to speak, perspective. A tinkering for my own pleasure that has led to the pleasure of friends (yes, I do have them and this darkness I give air to is but a necessary correlative to the decency I find imperative in my day-to-day life) and, now, and hopefully, to the pleasure of a wider range of readers with a passion for stories of strong, commanding and dominating, women who enjoy nothing more than to rule the lives of those men who fall into their toils.

Women whose shoes, you may be assured, I have fancied wearing on many an occasion while my fantasies pictured me exerting just such an irresistible power over my male subjects.

Hence my revisiting of these classic tales from the masters of antiquity from that period between the nineteenth-century and the early part of the twentieth.

When we domesticate the imagination we lose the joy of life.

But, sometimes, our more private thoughts must *not* be acted upon and should remain either written or perceived.

But *always* as imagination.

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Honfleur
2012

THE HOUSE OF AELLA

Hassan came in and began very deliberately to light the four lamps, muttering and smiling in the childish manner which characterizes some Egyptians. He wore a red cap, and a white robe confined at the waist by a red sash and on his brown feet he wore loose slippers, also of red. With good features and strong teeth, despite his closeness to the year of sixty, he made a very picturesque figure as he went slowly about his work.

As he lighted lamp after lamp and soft illumination crept about the big room, the heavy shadows created by the artificial light ensured the place seemed to become mysteriously enlarged; and yet, that it was an Eastern apartment in a house containing more than one, cunningly devised to appeal to the Western eye, a person familiar with Arab households must have seen at once, for it was so much a traditional Oriental interior it had become a stage setting rather than the nondescript and generally uninteresting environment of the modern Egyptian at home.

A setting designed to ensnare and seduce the unwary or gullible whose needs, and the strength of them, ensured they were susceptible to such simulated decadence and the exotic and, more importantly, *erotic* pleasures it promised.

Should, that is, the wary and susceptible also be in possession of funds enough to purchase the pleasures, ersatz though they may in the main prove, for themselves.

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, intricate carven woodwork having once adorned the palace of a Grand Wazir. Madame Aella, the owner of the interior, had bought them in Cairo and had had them fitted to her house in London’s Limehouse and a smaller brass lamp of very delicate workmanship was suspended in each of the recesses.

The whole place, in fact, and far from being authentically oriental, was a deliberate attempt to pander to the somewhat infantile expectations of the more credulous Westerner for whom the region still retained the possibility of an adventure of the… *exotic*… kind. Those adventures to be found depicted with grinding regularity in the more fanciful fictions of adventure that had become common fare of late and were responsible for more than a few expectations likely to meet only in disappointment along with the diminishment of bank and saving accounts.

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 the woman for whom he toiled came in.

Aella was a short Greek woman whose ink-black hair and olive coloration the careless observer might easily have mistaken for that of a Jewess or, as suited her purposes better, a woman of Cairo itself.

Though hour-glass of shape with a full and heavy bust, she had much the appearance of a somewhat joyless educator - an appearance that, given a controlling nature, was not so far off the mark even if she could be agreeable enough when it was in her interests to be so.

The latter, along with possessing an eye for an opportunity, explaining her ownership of both the house and her possession of a male-servant, some years her senior; this despite having settled herself in a land where custom and religion had long since decided man should rule over those of her gender. A male-servant who had once been a vibrant, if lowly example, of the Arab male her younger incarnation had found it ridiculously easy to mould into an attentive and obedient body-servant, and ground her still further in the belief that everything could be had for a price.

The price of the older man’s most times abject service to her being a release from the grinding poverty that had served to inhibit the expression of the vibrant manhood described already and ensured the demands of his stomach were seldom met fully.

Now, though, she was operating in a more Western environment – even if men still ruled the roost there.

Most times.

Standing in the centre of the place of her own design, she pushed a stray lock of her ink-black hair from a forehead that was remarkably youthful, given her forty and more years, and placed the carefully manicured nail of a forefinger to her lips.

A diamond ring glittered brilliantly in the coloured rays of the lanterns as it was refracted from the stone currently raised to those same plump and sensuous lips that belied a hard and uncompromising – to the point of female sadism at times – nature; while, with her other hand, she idly rattled the keys that hung from the wide leather belt buckled about her hour-glass waist and gave her the impression of a somewhat decadent and disciplinary jailer.

As her glance roved about the room appraisingly, her male retainer looked on in what could only be described as an anxiety of wretchedness. For, though he be a man of Egypt and unused to such… *authority*… in a woman – and especially over himself – he had experienced his employer's temper on a number of occasions since the debt of honour she had taken care of for him that, along with his poverty, had obliged him to commit to her service.

Temper, and the way in which she satisfied it, leaving him with no desire of even the smallest kind to experience it again.

Serving her as she went about her unwholesome business and leaving Egypt and accompanying her to England, to a land he considered full of both the degenerate and the unbelieving, was but a small price, he considered, if it meant the avoidance of her wrath.

Unsurprisingly, given the nature of the religion he followed, his fear of a mere woman was equally as shaming to him as the position he occupied in her household and the acts that same fear ensured he allowed her to force him to…

Shaking himself from a contemplation that pained him and for which his lack of true strength and will offered no power to remedy, Hassan watched as, walking to a beautifully carved Arab cabinet, she rearranged three pieces of Persian copperware which stood upon it before moving several cushions and taking up a leopard skin which lay upon the floor.

This she draped over an ebony chair which was inlaid intricately with ivory before favouring her manservant with a rare smile that told him, at least, that his efforts with the interior had not been entirely displeasing to her..

All too aware of her manservant's relief and, as usual, gratified that she could have such a commanding effect upon a man, the drooping eyelids of Aella drooped lower as, returning to the centre of the room, she critically surveyed the effect of these master touches. At the moment she resembled a rather formidable 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. A window-dresser, though, who wielded total control within the confines of the world she had designed.

Hassan lighted the sixth lamp, muttering smilingly and obsequiously all the time.

He was about to depart when Aella 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 her 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 and thus avoid the risk.

The Egyptian mind of a certain type is complex in its simplicity.

Aella gazed about her after he had left and she was quite alone, feeling energised by the command she exercised over her manservant; even if she pictured a time not *too* far in the future when she exercised that same power over another of his gender - if not one of the same race and one not so advanced in years.

A man she knew despised her and would be unwilling to bend his neck to her demands and, in the process, made her all the more determined to place her collar about his smug and superior neck.

Memory of his condescencion towards her provoked thunder clouds over her expression and she longed for that time when she could show him truly that his membership of the benighted race that was the English was not the badge of superiority over those from other lands he believed it to be. The hunger between her legs yearned for that time when she could exercise the same power over the white bastard that she exercised over Hassan. The impatience that had also been as much a part of her nature as the infinite pains she took to achieve her ends, did nothing to disperse the forming clouds as she wondered how far she truly was from attaining the man for herself.

Or, she thought with a scowl, delivering him, at least, to the no less degrading service of another.

Suddenly, the window-dresser was lost again to her exterior and she had become the autocratic and impossible to please mistress for whom no effort can possibly be enough.

She was distracted from her thoughts, however, when an outside bell rang from below her and in the distance and Hassan, treading silently, reappeared.

Crossing the room under her steely gaze, he opened a finely carved door and walked along a corridor it had concealed.

He *still* carried the lighted taper.

Presently there entered a man whose well-cut serge suit concealed 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 and a defining characteristic of the English when dealing with the *"lower races"*, be it at home or abroad.

Just the kind of man, you may be assured, the woman Aella *loved* to bring down to those depths where *she* resided as queen.

A lowering of status she was in the process of doing even as he entered – and had been doing so in her thoughts for some time prior to his arrival.

Soon, she promised herself, this handsome and self-deluding man would feel the pressure of her slender foot upon his neck and, by the time he realised it was there, it would be far too late for him to find any possibility – save perhaps for disgrace and imprisonment – of removing it.

Again, it struck her that she would not be *too* disappointed if the foot pressing his nose to the floor did not belong to her but another.

So long as the woman to whom she delivered his person was as demanding, strict, and unyielding as she herself.

As well as being amenable to allowing her benefactress to observe her debasement and humiliation of her new chattel.

Picturing herself back in Port Said, where she intended he would eventually accompany either her or the sister to whom he was delivered, metaphorically bound and shackled – this time as a the manservant of a woman - Aella inclined her head in his direction and, knowing he hated the performing of it but would be compelled by his English home-counties background to complete the courtesy, held her hand out to him at such a height, diamond ring sparkling in a way that was most opulent and impressive, that her expectation could not be declined without much rudeness on the man’s part.

As the Greek woman passing herself off as Arab had assured herself, he took her hand with as light a grip as possible and allowed his lips to rest upon the back of her hand so fleetingly she might not have been aware he had done so had she not been concentrating with much intent upon the act.

The look of distaste he was quite unable to suppress less hard to miss.

"I greet you, Major Grantham," she said. "Behold" - she waved her hand glitteringly - "all is prepared." Her voice, it must be pointed out, and though unmistakeably female, was neither nurturing nor seductive but, rather, gave the impression of one who did not simply expect to be in control but *demanded* it.

"Oh, yes," murmured the man she had addressed as a Major, glancing around without interest. "Good. You are beginning to get straight in your new quarters."

"How many in the party?" inquired the woman with another of her rare smiles that, if one was attentive enough, could be seen to seldom reach the lips.

"Three and myself."

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

"Only three," she muttered.

Major Grantham laughed.

"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 Aella, and contempt of himself for needing her… *business*.

"Will I know any of them?"

"Probably," he told her with the air of a man wanting a distasteful obligation over and done with as swiftly as possible – though she was sure he would react differently when his fee made contact with his outstretched hand.

Though she tried to quell her anger for his lack of respect towards her, her gaze was questioning and held more than a hint of warning:

"Do not tempt my patience," it seemed to say.

Not so contemptuous of the woman he could not find her… *unsettling* …the Major took the import of her gaze on board:

"General Sir Francis Payne, Mr. Eddie, and Sir Horace Tipton," he told her baldly, dressing his words with none of the little niceties one would expect from a well brought up Englishman for a woman with whom he was both conversing and doing business.

"An Anglo-American party?"

"Quite. Mr. Eddie is the proprietor of a group of American hotels justly celebrated for their great height and poisonous cuisine."

No feminine smile of Greek origin was cracked at his attempt at irony – knowing, possibly, that his humour was intended for his own enjoyment rather than hers.

“Sir Horace Tipton is a sportsman, globe-trotter, and soap manufacturer,” he went on. “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 cynicism of a man who has made a failure of his life and Aella enjoyed his bitterness for the perceived success of other men he deemed less worthy than himself.

It was, after all, as useful to her as her knowledge of the fraud that would see him committed to a cell for no small period and kept him at her side – even if he dressed their unequal relationship in a more even-footed way.

Deep in thought and nodding to herself, she rattled the keys that dangled from her wide-leather belt and gave her the appearance of some Amazonian jailer.

“So, we will have with us some sportsmen."

Major Grantham dropped into the carven chair upon which she had not moments before his entrance draped the leopard skin and, momentarily, the window-dresser leapt into life as Aella beheld one of her cunning effects destroyed.

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

Aella did not answer. This, as he well knew, was her province. Whatever the percentage, it would be *her* decision.

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

"If that is what I decide,” she told him with a tone of rebuke, not for the first time desiring to take a stronger hand with him and only restrained by the knowledge such precipitous behaviour might impact upon the course she had planned for his future life.

As pathetic and ineffectual as she had read his character to be – despite the artful way in which he dressed it for those of a less discerning gaze – he had about him that pride which goes hand in hand with personal frailties of the kind and to provoke that pride too soon would risk losing him.

Biting back her desire, Madame Aella allowed Major Grantham to look up at her with all the lazy insolence of his upbringing and contented herself instead with a fond anticipation of that time when he would join Hassan in his service to her and such insubordination could be dealt with in a more… *physical*… way.

"Why prevaricate?" he inquired. "Does Lucullus crave for sausages? Do philosophers play marbles? Their age and their *loins* dictates."

He laughed, noting the rather blank look of Aella and scored himself a mental victory for having placed the harpy on the back foot.

"You don't know what I'm talking about, do you?" he added.

No sound passed her lips and her expression remained blank, awaiting only the information that would either enlighten or infuriate.

"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. The more physical exploits of their youth are no longer to be had through the imperative of their own virility and strength of will and, consequently, they…”

Tiring suddenly he broke off and, with a dismissive wave of the hand, told her it was too trivial to tire himself with an explanation.

“I am bringing them to… *partake*,” he told her. “It is enough."

The vivid green eyes beneath that ink-black hair and set in unblemished olive skin, regarded him with a contempt that was the equal of his own. More so, in fact. The knowledge she was in possession of those facts of his life to break and shame him to his own people, and the certainty of what he would accept as a means of preventing her from doing so, allowing her to overlook his assumptions of…

Superiority.

"Perhaps it is," she told him cryptically, tone even and giving nothing of her thoughts in his regard away. "Your instincts in these matters have proved reliable to this point and I will consent to be informed by them."

A desire to taunt him, convinced as she was of his powerlessness in respect of her, found itself with the better of her:

"Is it not said that a good dragoman is a desirable husband?"

Major John Gordon Grantham resettled himself in his chair, the barb, as she had intended – not to mention the horror that she might be looking upon him as husband material - embedding itself at the heart of his ludicrous English pride and pomposity; existing still despite his reduced circumstances and the fact *she* provided him with the means by which to live.

"Madam," he said icily, anger overcoming what he *knew* was a situation gone way beyond his control – from the very first moment he *'took her shilling'*, so to speak - "we have done shady business together for a while now, both in Port Said and here, in London, and I go along with it for reasons of my own financial…"

He searched for the word least distasteful to describe the nature of his finances and found only the usual:

"…difficulties."

Madame Aella did not look particularly impressed.

It was, when all was said and done, a statement she was beginning to find more and more tiresome.

"But remember," he went on, eyes darkening and the posture of his upper body becoming more… *intimidatory*, "that though my finances compel me to go along with you for now, and will continue to so until they ease, I have my… *breaking points*."

As unconcerned by his *"breaking points"* as she was, Aella suppressed the urge to laugh at his pitiful attempt to regain what had, in effect, been only his own inflated sense of his much-vaunted masculinity in the first instance.

There was, after all, a lucrative night ahead and she did not wish to risk it by inviting acrimony from the Englishman she would, anyway, shortly be taming and domesticating for either her use or that of another's.

Plenty of time for acrimony and demands later, she told herself as she watched him gird his loins to finish his statement of male intent.

All of that acrimony and demand from her to *him*.

"I am aware you consider me your dragoman," he continued, loins girded; "but in future" – his eyes fixed upon her own - "and for your guidance, don't remind me of the fact or I'll wring your joyless Greek neck."

For a few moments, they remained locked in visual conflict, though the expression upon the face of the recipient of the threat did not so much as flicker. Madame Aella had long ago taken his measure and been a lot less than impressed with either width or height. He was her captive and knew it, the shame of which led to these little outbursts of menacing behaviour on his part as he attempted in vain to impress upon her that, though he take her shilling, he was not to be treated like some bought and paid for flunky. For a part of him sensed that, like Hassan, he was not a man in her eyes and the threats he aimed at her from time to time were just fatuous attempts to regain a position in her regard he had not occupied in the first place.

"It is obvious," she began, allowing herself a tiny smile she did not in the least feel like bestowing to take a little edge from what she was about to say and, hopefully, keep the evening upon an even keel, "that a conversation of sorts between us will be required so that we may mark more… *formal*… avenues down which our relationship is to continue. That you may, as it were, have a more perfect understanding of Madame Aella and her ways."

"I understand *'Madame Aella'* perfectly," drawled Grantham dismissively, the implied threat in her statement sailing completely over his complacent and superior head. "I was merely advising you to endeavour to understand me."

Without waiting to be asked, he rose from his seat and moved to a tall table upon which had been set some glasses and a decanter of Dows' imported Port.

He had gulped down a glass in one and was pouring another when he spoke next, not even deigning her with a glass as he informed her that:

“My party will arrive at nine o'clock and I am going back to the Savoy shortly to dress.”

He swallowed back another glass and then he did turn to face her, glass held towards her by way of reference:

“Port’s all very well, but gentlemen – and these gentlemen in particular – prefer their whisky and soda."

Without further ado, certain that his greater breeding and knowledge of such *‘gentlemanly’* matters would be acted upon, Major Grantham headed for the exit before she could call the pitiful flunky who waited upon her so obsequiously to show him out. He left without a word of goodbye or a thank you for the Dows he had just swallowed without being invited and, though he knew it was bad form and he was behaving badly, he justified it by assuring himself that, when it boiled down to it, and the money he took from her or not, she was at base still a Greek of humble birth - and a manipulative one at that – for whom the usual courtesies were not required and would certainly not be expected.

The moment he had left, the man he held in such contempt, Hassan the silent, glided into the extravagant interior bearing refreshments.

“He has gone,” Aella told him, not missing the look of relief upon her manservant’s face for the Major’s absence, knowing as she did of the distaste Hassan certainly returned in respect of him. “He will though, be back at nine.”

Placing his tray upon a little coffee-table to Madame Aella’s side, Hassan gave a little bow of acknowledgement.

“Will there be anything else, Madame Aella?” he asked, the investment of her time and… *discipline*… in the training of the older Egyptian man bringing the inquiry from his lips in a way that was now as natural as breathing.

Aella had been nothing if not focused and diligent in the schooling of her manservant.

Knowing her next action would be all that was required, Aella seated herself on a divan, legs apart from each other, and planted the smooth olive skin and painted nails of her feet squarely upon the animal skin upon which the divan rested.

Thoughts still full of the insolent and disdainful Englishman who, despite the fact he needed the money she provided him with so badly, and not forgetting the disgrace she could bring down upon him if she so wished, continued to believe his country of birth and the station to which he had been born within it made him her superior, Aella did not even look at her waiting manservant but simply took the folds of her costume in her hands and raised it slowly to reveal smooth and shapely, if somewhat over-defined, calf muscles.

Calf-muscles that travelled up past powerful thighs to reveal her womanhood.

The hairless slit that Hassan instantly fell to his knees to soothe, pamper and orally… *excite*… was as familiar to his sight and taste as the furnishings of the apartment themselves and he set about his worship of it confident in his ability to provide its owner with the pleasure that would put her in a less savage mood.

And, by so doing, dissuade her from venting her anger by other more… *draconian* …means on the vessel closest to hand.

Him.

That it was not Hassan himself Aella pictured between her legs as his obedient tongue lathed the folds of her labia prior to further exploration barely requires mentioning and the domesticated chattel serving her in such a way knew of it and was unmoved.

His one goal at that point was her completion and, should he be successful, he would have pleased his mistress no matter whose tongue she imagined serving her so degradingly.

Sure enough, it was not long before the tell-tale signs of her approaching crisis was revealed by the clamping of her thighs about his shaven head and he doubled the intensity of his probing to take her over the edge.

It was not long after that she left terra firma to spend a short and glorious spell in the otherworldly heaven that was her orgasm.

Still without words being required, and equally as silently as he had entered, the manservant who had just delivered his mistress her completion departed.

After he had left and she was quite alone and recovered, Aella partook of the refreshments and looked ahead to the time of the condescending Major's true fall.

No matter that not seconds before she had just been tongued to climax by her manservant, Madame Aella's capacious breasts heaved with the excitement and arousal the prospect of that coming fall instilled in her and she stared into the rapidly approaching future to that time when the so, so, superior Major John Gordon Grantham joined Hassan as the second – and lowest - of her servants.

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 and the peace and the heavy fragrances seemed to add to her anticipation of the Major's coming fealty to her.

"For the time would soon be upon them when he finally became hers and, when he did…"

ZAHARA

Zahara had overheard the latter part of the conversation and the sounds drawn from Madame Aella by the tongue of Hassan from her own apartment in the Greek woman's Limehouse dwelling. 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 Aella 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 Aella, 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. And when men like something it confers power on that something or…" large eyes had become calculating and hard, Zahara had told herself "…*someone*."

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 and 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 personal happiness.

Whatever form that might take in an individual.

But, 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 John Grantham would talk to her she felt sure he could teach her so much of his society and how she *might* become a fit with it.

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 confirmed mistress of the Great Craft and, as her mirror told her, more beautiful than she had ever been.

Therefore, what did Aella see in Safiyeh?

It was a puzzle 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 Madame Aella 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 puzzle 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 whose life, had she made that early journey across the ocean, she would by now be ruling in its entirety.

On such missed opportunities does fate turn.

Zahara, staring into the mirror now, 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 Aella preferred Safiyeh.

Even if another of their acquaintance did not.

Major John Gordon Grantham – oh, how she loved the Englishness of that name and title – liked her.

Twice she had read in his eyes that sort of interest which she knew so well how to detect and – yes - *manipulate*. It was a weakness in men she enjoyed but, because of a sense of loyalty to Aella (who seemed to have a purpose in mind for the Englishman whose services her money commanded, if not his obedience – yet) Zahara had never so much as glanced at Grantham in *that* way.

Her reverie was interrupted as Aella stepped past the carven screen separating their apartments and Zahara hoped she would not detain her long that she may return to her contemplation of the handsome Englishman.

Never the warmest of women, Madame Aella's manner was even more cold than usual as she rested her hand - without the intimacy usual in such a gesture - upon Zahara's shoulder for a moment and meeting her glance reflected in the mirror:

"There will be much money here to-night," she said. "Make the best of your opportunities. Limehouse is foggy, yes. But it pays better than Port Said."

Her fingers, with its big diamond glittering effectively in the wavy gold, ran through Zahara's hair absentmindedly then she turned and went out.

Sitting listening intently, Zahara could hear her talking in a subdued voice to Safiyeh, and could detect the Egyptian's low-spoken replies.

*****

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 Aella a rest. Besides, there has been nobody worthwhile at any of the hotels or clubs during the last fortnight."

"Somebody worthwhile is 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 and making it obedient to her femininity.

"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.

Finally:

"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. Chilly, misty Limehouse. She had grown so very lonely since Safiyeh had come and taken that attention which once had been solely hers and, 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.

Almost.

"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 John Grantham asked her to go away with him it would be nice to go and she suddenly realized how deep was her loathing of this Limehouse and of the people she met there, who were all alike.

This man was different and, despite the air of superiority he adopted, even with her, she knew he was of a type she could easily manage and – yes – *control*.

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.

A contest, after all, was only enjoyable when there was no danger of being lost.

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 Aella 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* 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, he thought as he watched her leave, very graceful.

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 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 Aella 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 Limehouse distrust its shadows – it *does* have something of a *chilling* history after all - 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 and that he had held the King's commission at some time was generally assumed to be the fact.

His real name, however, and as Madame Aella knew only too well for his liking, was not Grantham and his continuing, nevertheless, to style himself "Major" was sufficient evidence that he was man who lived by his wits.

From the fact that he appeared to live and dress well those interested enough to consider it 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 and the shadowed ways of Limehouse ceased to exist for him. In spirit, at least, 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 many 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 was too great and he had laughed - at himself as well as at her – for her playing of the Great Game so skilfully and exquisitely, knowing that when he was gone there would soon be someone else.

Yet he had never told her that he doubted and had promised many things.

And then 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.

Eyes hardened to human suffering were suddenly moist.

"I never knew."

That brother he had counted a myth had succeeded in getting on board the transport from Gibraltar and before Grantham's inner vision the whole dreadful scene now was re-enacted.

The struggle in the stateroom formed before his eyes and he even seemed to hear the sound of the shot, to see the Spaniard, drenched with blood from a wound in his forehead and the cry it drew from him:

"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.

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 re-entered and went in through the curtained doorway to summon Aella, but she was dressing and would not be disturbed.

The manservant 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, it must be said, and underlining Grantham’s own contempt for the man who could allow a woman to treat him the way Madame Aella treated him, 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.

That she had seen him physically reprimanded by his mistress and forced to kneel in shame as he reflected upon his… *behaviour*… did not enhance his manhood in her eyes either.

Though, she was forced to confess to herself, the arousal the sight of Madame Aella’s hand descending upon his unprotected arse-cheeks had inspired in her did not inspire fond thoughts of her own womanhood along with it.

"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 the Major. 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 besides 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 of slender build 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 and 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.

"Madame Aella 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."

Zahara shrugged.

"And," the man pressed on, "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. Either that 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? 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, knowing 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. But only if you tell me 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."

"Hmm," 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.

Then finally:

"I will tell Hassan that you are to be admitted."

“We are both most grateful.”

Zahara 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 Madame Aella that they had seen scores of such dances and dancers. Safiyeh, who had very little English, had not understood this.

Because, presently, Safiyeh 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 Madame 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 Aella that a distinguished foreigner with an introduction from someone she knew had paid ten pounds to be present and, because she had given Aella the ten pounds, Aella had agreed to admit the visitor.

She could hear the woman 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 Aella, 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 Aella complacently.

She rattled the keys that hung from her belt and Zahara knew she liked the effect of power their presence endowed.

"The keeper of the keys"

Both to the secrets of the men she enslaved and to the cells to which she confined them that, though they be metaphorical in design, were as secure and inescapable as the lowest dungeon in the deepest recesses of an impregnable prison.

When presently the music commenced and the players were concealed behind the tall screen, an expectant hush fell upon the wine-flushed company as Hassan, who played the darabukkeh, modulates its throbbing 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. Aella, seated alone in the chair over which she had draped the leopard skin, was glancing sideways toward the screen which concealed Safiyeh. 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 raised her veil to reveal the full seductive power of her eyes and tossed the rose on to the knees of…

General Sir Francis Payne!

The sound of three revolver shots fired in quick succession rang out above the throbbing music and the General 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.

Coincidental with the crash made by his falling body came the loud bang of a door.

The Spaniard had gone.

"By God, sir! Its murder, its 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 while 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 and 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 and her thoughts were heady with the prospect.

He belonged to her now and the knowledge that he did stirred new feelings in her breast.

Suddenly, she viewed the Englishman in a wholly different light and the diffidence she had seen as male strength of character revealed itself to her as the worst kind of weakness.

He was, she knew now, no more than a liar and a cheat whose life she had saved from men sent to kill him for his having wooed away the wife of one of them.

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 of the murdered General which lay so near her upon the carpet, a look of admiration still written across its now lifeless face, so great had been his approval for her dance and so sudden its end.

"We must get out this way!" she heard.

The American

"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; thoughts now, she could tell, for himself and no other.

A strange feeling stole over Zahara as she watched him and it would only be a few moments later that she would be able to describe that feeling perfectly.

It was, she would tell herself:

Contempt.

A contempt which, strangely enough, did *not* kill his attraction for her.

Though it did change it in the most drastic of ways.

Madame Aella was watching her closely and, as Grantham ushered her guests out, moved to her side and spoke quietly, words composed to let the girl know she too knew of the subterfuge she had been about with the rose that had ensured the General's murder:

"You have saved him," she said, referring to Gresham, "and taken the life of an innocent, if not good, man in his stead," she told Zahara. "Are you convinced he is worth it?"

Watching Grantham as he made preparations to remove the General's body to, no doubt, a less incriminating location, Zahara was convinced of no such thing. The man, she could see now with all the certainty the removal of scales from the eyes inspired, was made of nothing more substantial than the mallow that melted in the mouth upon first contact with its moistness and warmth. *Everything* he did was geared to serve his own self-interest.

"Wrap him in that rug, Hassan, while I fetch the car to the back," Grantham told Aella's manservant and then, almost as if he wished to underline the low opinion of his worth held by a girl who had saved his life and once admired him:

"I want him found nowhere near anywhere that can connect him to me."

The man's handsome face she had once so admired, Zahara told herself, contained all that was self-serving in a person. She suspected he knew, somehow, that the bullets had been intended for him and that she had diverted the path of them away that he might be saved. Yet of gratitude there was none and his one overriding thought was for himself.

"Sometimes," Madame Aella whispered softly, divining the girl's change of heart, an unusually tender hand stroking the creamy skin of her right-forearm, "it requires but a brief lifting of the veil for the truth to be seen and the possibility of… *love*… for a man to become something quite…"

Aella took the girl's chin in her hand and gently turned her beautiful face to her own before she finished her sentence:

"…*different*."

As Grantham rushed from the apartment to fetch the car, Zahara could only nod her agreement.

“Some men are unworthy to be the lovers of women such as us,” Madame Aella went on, knowing how flattered the girl would be by both the unaccustomed intimacy and the description of herself as, almost, her employer’s equal.

Again a thoughtful Zahara nodded. Aella was right. The Englishman was both unworthy and weak and, fickle and capricious as she was, what had once been admiration and a desire to be admired in turn, had twisted to contempt for that which she had misguidedly saved.

“They can however, and if the inducement is binding enough,” Aella went on, “make – like Hassan there – the most obedient of servants.”

Zahara was already ahead of her employer and was replaying the scene she had spied earlier of Hassan with his head between the legs of his mistress, tongue busily engaged upon the task of pleasuring her; transposing the body and features of the Arab body-servant and chattel for those of the more dashing, if morally weak and despicable, Grantham.

“Sooner than you think,” Madame Aella told her, smile indicating she knew of her earlier intrusion and had forgiven her it, “it will be the handsome Englishman whose obedient tongue serves at the altar of womanhood. Not just mine, but yours and Safiyeh’s also.”

In that instant, and with all the possibilities arising from Major John Gordon Grantham joining Hassan in the same abject servitude to Madame Aella – and, by extension, *her* - Zahara went from being Madame Aella’s paid employee to her willing friend and acolyte.

Madame Aella, she knew with certainty, did not make idle boasts and if she was convinced she could make of the man a servant – superior Englishman or not – it would be only because she was convinced of the man’s inherent weakness and the information in her possession capable of commanding it.

“I think we will take great pleasure in domesticating this beast and, when he proves disobedient or inefficient, correcting his faults.”

Zahara did not doubt Madame Aella's sincerity in this and the inclusiveness of both her words and manner ensured the clouds of unrequited desire lifted fully – this in spite of the body of a dead man being wrapped in a rug for whose demise she was indirectly responsible.

Suddenly, Zahara's spirits were lighter than she could recall them having been since the time of the young American boy and the promise of a new life that was not to be.

A life, this time, which *would* be.

A life in which *she* would finally exercise a modicum of control over her own existence – as well as that of another's.

For now, it was Aella who was offering her, along with Safiyeh, the possibility of yet another re-birth and this time there was no over-protective mother to prevent her acceptance.

And in it would be the presence of their very own, tame and thoroughly domesticated, English manservant,

END