

TEA FOR TWO

By Francis Annesley



HE tea-shop looked warmly inviting after the foggy street—the many-coloured oriental lamps dimly revealed the divan-furnished corners. They chose a retreat at the furthest end, lattice-screened, and a veritable Fatima in gay Turkish costume awaited orders.

“Russian tea for two and cigarettes,” he said. He glanced keenly at her fat comeliness, then turned to his companion with an air of triumphant possession.

“So I have captured you at last, my lady! To think that after all those years of exile I should have to plead like a whining beggar for one short hour of your company.”

“I was afraid.”

“Of me?”

“No, of myself. I remembered the old times when you had only to call and I came—but now——”

“Married to a brute—why did you sell yourself?”

“You had vanished, with my heart—you took that.” A tender light shone in the violet eyes. “No answer came to my letters—there was nothing but my body left—a mere shell—and I was so poor.”

He touched the rich sables on her gown. “Do these suffice?”

“They did—till you came back.”

He leaned against the cushions regarding her.

“Dear little sunny curls, rose-leaf face, sweet mouth made to be kissed—eyes — look up, *ma mie*—surely there are not tears in them? You are mine and I have come to claim you.”

She looked up startled.

“You must be mad—I cannot give you what is not mine to give.”

“I’ve half a mind to kill the brute,” he growled, gnawing savagely at his moustache.

“You were always fierce. Do you remember the kitten?”

“Ah! I was a tiny chap then. I killed it because it belonged to your brother and he would not let me have it for my own. I didn’t kill *him*.”

“It was murder all the same. Now give me some tea before it is cold, and don’t talk horrors.”

He seized her hand roughly, grasping it till her jewelled rings bruised her fingers; she raised her eyes in piteous entreaty, meeting his dark ones full of passion, masterful, scorching her soul.

Honour, duty, pleaded feebly, “Let me go.”

“Not this side of eternity,” he whispered, “let what may come after.”

He lighted her cigarette and they smoked silently.

Out in the street sounded the unending roar of traffic, blended with the near tinkle of spoons and the clatter, talk and laughter inseparable from a popular tea-room.

“Tell me of your life in India. Why did you let us all think you had vanished?”

“I was up-country most of the time, in native dress, studying the people, their works and ways, but especially native therapeutics.”

“What’s that?”

“Oh! all their notions of healing and drugs and herb medicines. It is enormously interesting when you come to try experiments.”

“And on whom did you practise?”

“On myself, mainly. I’m pretty well inured to most forms of opium.”

"What are its charms? I've often wondered."

"Absolute physical blessedness, and a world of light and air and colour in which one's mind may roam."

"How delightful! Can any one use it safely?"

"Some forms are quite safe, but there are preparations that kill."

"At once?"

"No—only, after a time, the dreams and visions land one where there is no waking."

She shivered. "I am afraid—I don't want to die yet."

"Not even with me?" he queried.

"No of course not. Why with you?"

He laughed. "Do you remember Browning's line?"

'It was the only way to keep her mine.'

"Do you mean that he killed her to keep her? How horribly selfish! Why do you frighten me so? I shall go home."

She gathered up her sable cloak.

"The hour is not up yet—I will have my bond—you are going to drink another glass of tea and smoke another cigarette—one of my special brand."

He drew a tiny case out of an inner pocket.

"Is this medicated?" she asked.

"Try it—it is quite safe—just a whiff of haschisch."

Then the fresh tea arrived.

"Oh! by the way," he said, "I've an old curiosity to show you—a carved image of an Indian idol—the god Hanuman."

She took it. "How ugly! What is the stone?"

"Take it nearer to the light and look at it."

She moved from the little table and stood under the hanging lamp at the entrance to the alcove—a dainty figure,

slim, graceful, the light striking the copper-coloured waves of hair. He was not looking at her, but watching two tiny pellets dissolve in the glasses into which he had dropped them.

"Take it away—it is horrible—those Indian things always fill me with terrified fascination."

"Come and drink your tea, and I'll light your cigarette."

Her eyes grew brighter as she smoked, and she laughed more gaily than before.

"This is different tea—I like it better than the last—the cigarette has made me thirsty."

She finished her glass.

He talked on, in a soothing voice, of strange lands and people, and presently noticed a drowsy look come over her.

She rose stupidly. "Take me home—I feel so funny and sleepy. This place must be very hot."

He wrapped her furs around her, paid the waitress, and told her to call a hansom.

He gave the cabman an address in a far suburban road.

"Where did you tell him? It didn't sound like home."

Then the fair head drooped. She nestled up to him. After endless turnings they were clear of the main streets. The fog lifted a little, the gaslight from street lamps fell on a white still face. He gathered her closer in a passionate embrace. The tinkle of the harness bell ceased at last, the cabman drew up at the corner of a deserted road, planted with small starveling trees at intervals, its chilly villas half-lit and forbidding.

There was silence for a space—the cabman wondered why his fare did not move—and then opened his trap-door.

"My Gawd!" he ejaculated, and beckoned to the policeman who was standing under a gas-lamp across the road.

