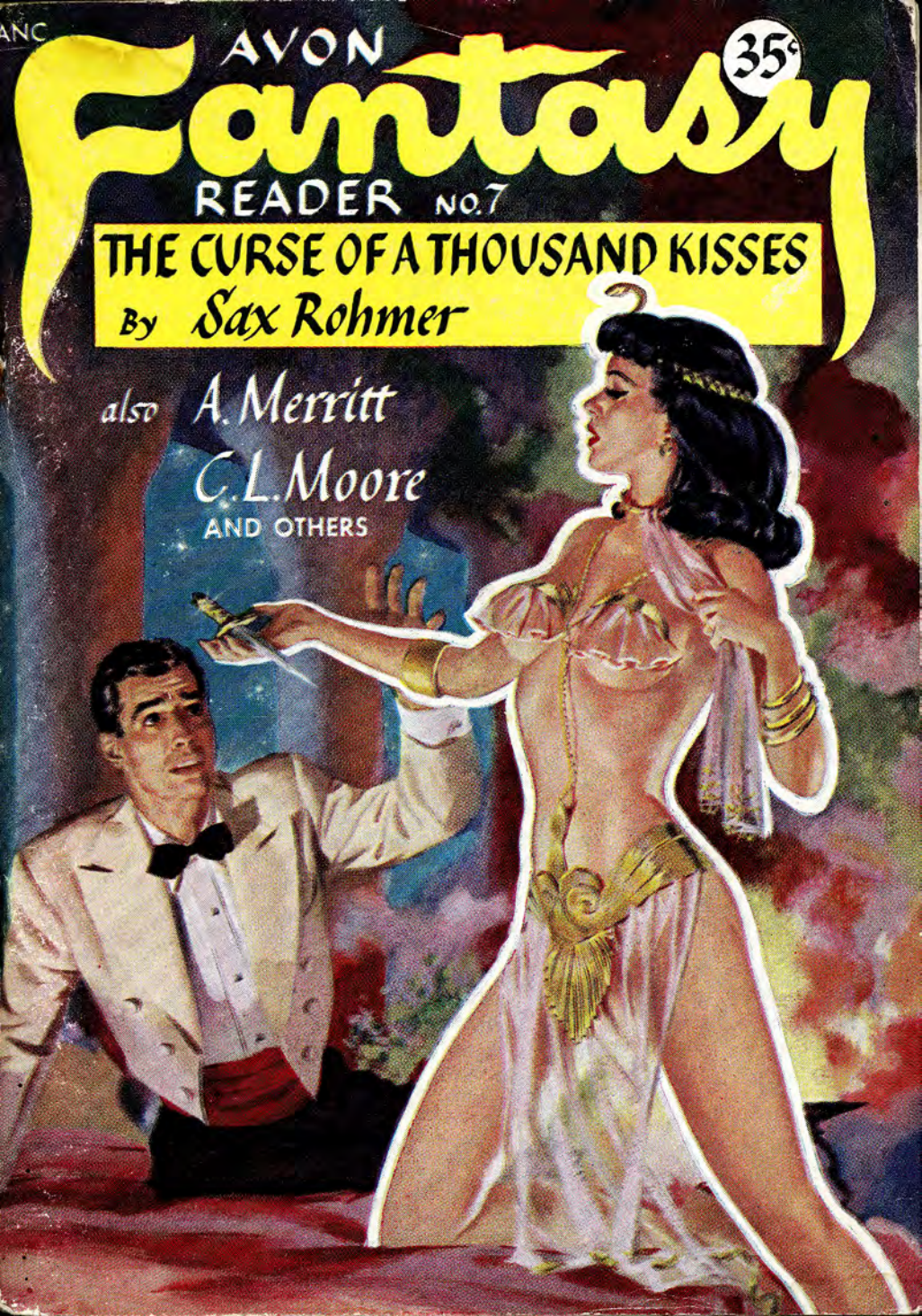
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also A. Merritt
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AND OTHERS

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# AVON
# FANTASY READER
## NO. 7

Edited By
DONALD A. WOLLHEIM

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SAX ROHMER • ROBERT E. HOWARD
CLARK ASHTON SMITH • LORD DUNSANY
C. L. MOORE • FRANK BELKNAP LONG
FRITZ LEIBER, JR. • FRANK GRUBER
A. MERRITT • DONALD A. WOLLHEIM

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# The Curse of a Thousand Kisses

## by Sax Rohmer

*Fu Manchu has become one of the small band of literary beings, like Sherlock Holmes and Tarzan of the Apes, to achieve world-wide immortality and familiarity. The books of Sax Rohmer, creator of the insidious Asiatic doctor, have brought to millions the breath of the mysterious Orient, the legend-haunted, incense-filled atmosphere of the oldest civilizations of Man. The short story we have chosen to reprint is one of Sax Rohmer's least known tales, yet it is one that the author himself once designated as his favorite. An unforgettable legend out of Egypt, this is the first time in very many years that it has been brought back to the American public.*

### Introductory

SAVILLE GRAINGER will long be remembered by the public as a brilliant journalist and by his friends as a confirmed misogynist. His distaste for the society of women amounted to a mania, and to Grainger a pretty face was like a red rag to a bull. This was all the more extraordinary and, for Grainger, more painful, because he was one of the most handsome men I ever knew—very dark, with wonderful flashing eyes and the features of an early Roman—or, as I have since thought, of an aristocratic Oriental; aquiline, clean-cut, and swarthy. At any mixed gathering at which he appeared, women gravitated in his direction as though he possessed some magnetic attraction for the sex; and Grainger invariably bolted.

His extraordinary end—never explained to this day—will be remembered by some of those who read of it; but so much that affected whole continents has occurred in the interval that to the majority of the public the circumstances will no longer be familiar. It created a considerable stir in Cairo at the time, as was only natural, but when the missing man failed to return, the nine days' wonder of his disappearance was forgotten in the excitement of some new story or another.

Briefly, Grainger, who was recuperating at Mena House after a rather severe illness in London, went out one evening for a stroll, wearing a light dust-coat over his evening clothes and smoking a cigarette. He turned in the direction of the Great Pyramid—and never came back. That is the story in its bald entirety. No one has ever seen him since—or ever reported having seen him.

If the following story is an elaborate hoax—perpetrated by Grainger himself, for some obscure reason remaining in hiding, or by another well acquainted with his handwriting—I do not profess to say. As to how it came into my possession, that may be told very briefly. Two years after Grainger'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. I stood there in the dusk, staring at the packet in my hand and then after the tall figure—already swallowed up in the shadow of the road. Naturally I assumed that the man had made some mistake, and holding the package near the lamp of the car I 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!

I entered the car, rather dazed by the occurrence, which presented several extraordinary features, and, unfastening the string, began to read. Then, in real earnest, I thought I must be dreaming. Since I append the whole of the manuscript I will make no further reference to the contents here, but will content myself with mentioning that it was written—with dark-brown ink—in Saville Grainger's unmistakable hand upon some kind of parchment or papyrus which has 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.

That part of Grainger's narrative, if the following amazing statement is really the work of Grainger, which deals with events up to the time that he left Mena House—and the world—I have been able to check. The dragoman,

Hassan Abd-el-Kebir, was still practising his profession at Mena House at the time of my visit, and he confirmed the truth of Grainger's story in regard to the heart of lapis-lazuli, which he had seen, and the meeting with the old woman in the Mûski—of which Grainger had spoken to him.

For the rest, the manuscript shall tell Grainger's story.

## The Manuscript

### I

Two years have elapsed since I quitted the world, and the presence in Egypt of a one-time colleague, of which I have been advised, prompts me to put on record these particulars of the strangest, most wonderful, and most beautiful experience which has ever befallen any man. I do not expect my story to be believed. The scepticism of the material world of Fleet Street will consume my statement with its devouring fires. But I do not care. The old itching to make a "story" is upon me. As a "story" let this paper be regarded.

Where the experience actually began I must leave 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; and despite my ignorance of the language and customs of the natives I awakened to the fact that a link of sympathy—of silent understanding—seemed to bind me to these busy brown men.

I had for many years cherished a secret ambition to pay a protracted visit to Egypt, but the ties of an arduous profession hitherto had rendered its realisation impossible. Now, a stranger in a strange land, I found myself *at home*. I cannot hope to make evident to my readers the completeness of this recognition. 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 only real happiness I ever knew—indeed, as I soon began to realise, 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.

Delightedly I watched the passage of those commercial vehicles, narrow and set high upon monstrous wheels, which convey loads of indescribable variety along streets no wider than the "hall" of a small suburban residence. The

Parsees in the Khan Khalil 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 *yashmaḳs* to allure the eye —all these 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.

Mendicants crying the eternal *"Baḳshish!", Saḳhas* 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.

I purposely haunted the Mûski during the heat of the day because at that hour it was comparatively free from the presence of Europeans and Americans. Thus, on the occasion of which I write, 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 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 and also glancing back apprehensively over his shoulder. He all but collided with me in his blind haste; and, stepping quickly aside to avoid him, I knocked down an old woman who was coming out of the street.

The man who had been the real cause of the accident rode off at headlong speed and I found myself left with the poor victim of my clumsiness in a spot which seemed miraculously to have become deserted. 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 there were none.

I stooped to the old woman, who lay moaning at my feet . . . and as I did so, I shrank. How can I describe the loathing, the repulsion which I experienced? Never in the whole of my career had I seen such a hideous face. A ragged black veil which she wore had been torn from its brass fastenings as she fell, and her countenance was revealed in all its appalling ugliness. Yellow, shrivelled, toothless, it was scarcely human; but above all, it repelled because of its aspect of *extreme age*. I do not mean that it was like the face of a woman of eighty; it was like that of a woman who had miraculously survived decease for several centuries! It was a witch-face, a deathly face.

And as I shrank, she opened her eyes, moaning feebly, and groping with claw-like hands as if darkness surrounded her. Furthermore I saw a new pain,

and a keener pain, light up those aged eyes. She had detected my involuntary movement of loathing.

Those who knew me will bear testimony to the fact that I was not an emotional man or one readily impressionable by any kind of human appeal. Therefore they will wonder the more to learn that this pathetic light in the old woman's eyes changed my revulsion to a poignant sorrow. I had roughly knocked her from her feet and now hesitated to assist her to rise again! Truly, she was scorned and rejected by all. A wave of tenderness, that cannot be described, that could not be resisted, swept over me. My eyes grew misty and a great remorse claimed me.

"Poor old soul!" I whispered.

Stooping, I gently raised the shrivelled, ape-like head, resting it against my knee; and, bending down, I kissed the old woman on the brow!

I record the fact, but even now, looking back upon its happening, and seeking to recapture the cold, solitary Saville Grainger who has left the world, I realise the wonder of it. That *I* should have given rein to such an impulse! That such an impulse should have stirred me! Which phenomenon was the more remarkable?

The result of my act—regretted as soon as performed—was singular. The aged, hideous creature sighed in a manner I can never forget, and an expression that almost lent comeliness to her features momentarily crept over her face. Then she rose to her feet with difficulty, raised her hands as if blessing me, and muttering something in Arabic went shuffling along the deserted street, stooping as she walked.

Apparently the episode had passed unnoticed. Certainly if anyone witnessed it he was well concealed. But, conscious of a strange embarrassment, with 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 was repugnant, I wanted to wipe my lips—but something seemed to forbid the act; a lingering compassion that was almost a yearning.

For once in my life I desired to find myself among normal, healthy, moderately brainless Europeans. I longed for the smell of cigar-smoke, for the rattle of the cocktail-maker and the sight of a pretty face. I hurried to Shepheard's.

## II

The same night, after dinner, I walked out of Mena House to look for Hassan Abd-el-Kebir, the dragoman with whom I had contracted for a journey,

by camel, to Sakhara 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.

I failed to find him, however, among the dragomans and other natives seated outside the hotel, and to kill time I strolled leisurely down the road toward the electric-tram terminus. 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, and, touching his brow, his lips and his breast with both hands, bowed and departed. I saw him no more!

Standing there in the road, I stared at the little package stupidly. It consisted of a piece of fine white silk fastened about some small, hard object. Evidently, I thought, there had been a mistake. The package could not have been intended for me.

Returning to the hotel, I stood near a lamp and unfastened the silk, which was delicately perfumed. It contained 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 native had made a strange mistake. This was a love-token—and emphatically not for *me*!

I was standing there lost in wonderment, 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. I looked up.

"Well?" I said.

Then I, too, said no more. Hassan Abd-el-Kebir 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, laughing. "But does it alarm you?"

"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 do the figures mean?" I asked.

"They form the word *alf,*" he replied.

"*Alf?* Somebody's name!" I said, still laughing.

"In Arab it mean ten hundred," he whispered.

"A thousand?"

"Yes—one thousand."

"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 envy and compassion 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. "But I will tell you, yes, only you will not believe me."

"Never mind. Tell me."

Thereupon Hassan Abd-el-Kebir told me the most improbable story to which I had ever listened. Since to reproduce it in his imperfect English, with my own frequent interjections, would be tedious, I will give it in brief. Some of the historical details, imperfectly related by Hassan as I learned later, I have corrected.

In the reign of the Khalif El-Mamûn—a son of Hárun er-Rashid 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 Khalif as the most beautiful maiden in the land. Wazirs and princes sought her hand in vain. Her heart was given to a handsome young merchant of Cairo, Ahmad er-Madi, 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 harem 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 Khalif.

Exiled in a distant oasis, the Sheikh of which was bound to Ahmad by ties of ancient friendship, the prospect which had seemed so alluring to Scheherazade became clouded. Recognising this change in her attitude, Ahmad er-Madi 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 Khalif, visiting Egypt, chanced to lose his way on a hunting expedition, and came upon the secret oasis in which Scheherazade was hiding. 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. Bidding Ahmad to look into a mirror, he burned the secret perfumes and uttered the prescribed incantation. At first mistily, and then quite clearly, Ahmad saw Scheherazade, standing in the moonlight beneath a tall palm tree—her lips raised to those of her former suitor!

At that the world grew black before the eyes of Ahmad. And he, who had come a long and arduous journey at the behest of love, now experienced an equally passionate 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 an ugliness beyond that of humanity, and which should remain with her not for the ordinary span of a lifetime but for incalculable years, during which she should continue to live in the flesh, loathed, despised, and shunned of all!

"Until one thousand compassionate men, unasked and of their own free will, shall each have bestowed a kiss upon thee," was the exact text of the curse. "Then thou shalt regain thy beauty, thy love—and death."

Ahmad er-Madi staggered out from the cavern, blinded by a hundred emotions—already sick with remorse; and one night's stage on his return journey

dropped dead from his saddle . . . stricken by the malignant will of the awful being whose power he had invoked! I will conclude this wild romance in the words of Hassan, the dragoman, as nearly as I can recall them.

"And so," he said, his voice lowered in awe, "Scheherazade, who was 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, 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. To each man who bestowed a kiss upon her—and such men were rare—she caused a heart of lapis to be sent, and upon the heart was engraved in gold the number of the kiss! It is said that these gifts ensured to those upon whom they were bestowed the certain possession of their beloved! Once before, when I was a small child, I saw such an amulet, and the number upon it was nine hundred and ninety-nine."

The thing was utterly incredible, of course; merely a picturesque example of Eastern imagination; but just to see what effect it would have upon him, I told Hassan about the old woman in the Mûski. I had to do so. Frankly, the coincidence was so extraordinary that it worried me. When I had finished:

"It was she—Scheherazade," he said fearfully. "And it was the *last* kiss!"

"What then?" I asked.

"Nothing, my gentleman. I do not know!"

## III

Throughout the expedition to Sakhara on the following day I could not fail to note that Hassan was covertly watching me—and his expression annoyed me intensely. It was that compound of compassion and resignation which one might bestow upon a condemned man.

I charged him with it, but of course he denied any such sentiment. Nevertheless, I knew that he entertained it, and, what was worse, I began, in an uncomfortable degree, to share it with him! I cannot make myself clearer. But I simply felt the normal world to be slipping from under my feet, and, no longer experiencing a desire to clutch at modernity as I had done after my meeting with the old woman, I found myself to be reconciled to my fate!

To my fate? . . . to what fate? I did not know; but I realized, beyond any shade of doubt, that something tremendous, inevitable, and ultimate was about to happen to me. I caught myself unconsciously raising the heart of lapis-lazuli to my lips! Why I did so I had no idea; I seemed to have lost identity. I no longer knew myself.

When Hassan parted from me at Mena House that evening he could not disguise the fact that he regarded the parting as final; yet my plans were made for several weeks ahead. Nor did I quarrel with the man's curious attitude. I regarded the parting as final, also!

In a word I was becoming reconciled—to something. It is difficult, all but impossible, to render such a frame of mind comprehensible, and I shall not even attempt the task, but leave the events of the night to speak for themselves.

After dinner I lighted a cigarette, 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. Once I looked back—bidding 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 why I did so I had no idea.

All who read my story will be prepared to learn that in this placid and apparently feeble frame of mind I slipped from life, from the world. It was not so. The modern man, the Saville Grainger once known in Fleet Street, came to life again for one terrible, strenuous moment . . . and then passed out of life for ever.

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—a tall, muffled native appeared at my elbow. He was the same man who had brought me the heart of lapis-lazuli, or his double. I started.

He touched me lightly on the arm.

"Follow," he said—and pointed ahead into the darkness below the plateau.

I moved off obediently. Then—suddenly, swiftly, came revolt. The modern man within me flared into angry life. I stopped dead, and "Who are you? Where are you leading me?" I cried.

I received no reply.

A silk scarf was slipped over my head by someone who, silently, must have been following me, and drawn tight enough to prevent any loud outcry but not so as to endanger my breathing. I fought like a madman. I knew, and the knowledge appalled me, that I was fighting for life. Arms like bands of steel grasped me; I was lifted, bound and carried—I knew not where. . . .

Placed in some kind of softly padded saddle, or, as I have since learned, into a *shibriyeh* or covered litter on a camel's back, I felt the animal rise to its ungainly height and move off swiftly. As suddenly as revolt had flamed up, resignation returned. I was contented. My bonds were unnecessary; my re-

bellion was ended. I yearned, wildly, for the end of the desert journey! Someone was calling me and all my soul replied.

For hours, as it seemed, the camel raced ceaselessly on. Absolute silence reigned about me. Then, in the distance I heard voices, and the gait of the camel changed. Finally the animal stood still. Came a word of guttural command, and the camel dropped to its knees. Pillowed among a pile of scented cushions, I experienced no discomfort from this usually painful operation.

I was lifted out of my perfumed couch and set upon my feet. Having been allowed to stand for a while until the effects of remaining so long in a constrained position had worn off, I was led forward into some extensive building. Marble pavements were beneath my feet, fountains played, and the air was heavy with burning ambergris.

I was placed with my back to a pillar and bound there, but not harshly. The bandage about my head was removed. I stared around me.

A magnificent Eastern apartment met my gaze—a great hall open on one side to the desert. Out upon the sands I could see a group of men who had evidently been my captors and my guards. The one who had unfastened the silk scarf I could not see, but I heard him moving away behind the pillar to which I was bound.

Stretched upon a luxurious couch before me was a woman.

If I were to seek to describe her I should inevitably fail, for her loveliness surpassed everything which I had ever beheld—of which I had ever dreamed. I found myself looking into her eyes, and in the depths I found all that I had missed in life, and lost all that I had found.

She smiled, rose, and taking a jewelled dagger from a little table beside her, approached me. My heart beat until I felt almost suffocated as she came near. And when she bent and cut the silken lashing which bound me, I knew such rapture as I had hitherto counted an invention of Arabian poets. I was raised above the joys of common humanity and tasted the joys of the gods. She placed the dagger in my hand.

"My life is thine," she said. "Take it."

And clutching at the silken raiment draping her beautiful bosom, she invited me to plunge the blade into her heart!

The knife dropped, clattering upon the marble pavement. For one instant I hesitated, watching her, devouring her with my eyes; then I swept her to me and pressed upon her sweet lips the thousand and first kiss. . . .

(Note.—The manuscript of Saville Grainger finishes here.)