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WEIRD STORY REPRINTS

No. 10. *The Mummy's Foot**

By THEOPHILE GAUTIER

I HAD idly entered the shop of one of those curiosity-venders who, in the Parisian lingo, are called merchants of bric-à-brac.

Doubtless you have glanced through the windows into one of those shops which have become so numerous since it is the fashion to buy antique furniture, and since the pettiest stockbroker thinks he must have his "medieval room."

There is one thing that clings alike to the shop of the dealer in old iron, the wareroom of the tapestry-maker, the laboratory of the alchemist, and the studio of the artist: in these mysterious dens through whose window-shutters a furtive twilight flutters, the thing that is most manifestly ancient is the dust; there the spider-webs are more authentic than the gongs, and the old pear-wood furniture is younger than the mahogany which arrived yesterday from America.

The wareroom of my bric-à-brac dealer was a veritable Capernaum; all centuries and all countries seemed to have rendezvoused there: an Etruscan lamp of red clay stood upon a Boule cabinet whose ebony panels were brilliantly inlaid with filaments of brass; a Louis XV half-lounge carelessly stretched its fawnlike feet under a massive table of the reign of Louis XIII, with heavy oaken spirals, and carvings of intermingled foliage and chimeras.

In one corner glittered the striped breastplate of a damascened suit of Milanese armor; bisque cupids and nymphs, grotesques from China, *céladon* and *craquelé* vases, Saxon and old Sèvres cups, encumbered whatnots and corners.

Upon the futed shelves of several dressers glittered immense plates from Japan, with designs in red and blue relieved by gilt hatching, side by side with several Bernard Palissy enamels, showing frogs and lizards in relief work.

From disemboweled cabinets escaped cascades of Chinese silk lustrous with silver, billows of brocade, sown with luminous specks by a slanting sunbeam, while portraits of every epoch, in frames more or less tarnished, smiled out through their yellow varnish.

The dealer followed me with precaution through the tortuous passage between the piles of furniture, fending off with his hand the hazardous swing of my coat-tails, watching my elbows with the uneasy attention of the antiquary and the usurer.

It was a singular figure, that of the dealer: an immense cranium, polished like a knee, and surrounded by a meager aureole of white hair that brought out all the more vividly the clear pink tint of the skin, gave him a false air of patriarchal simplicity, contradicted by the sparkling of two little yellow eyes, which trembled in their orbits like two *louis d'ors* on a surface of quicksilver. The curve of

*Translated from the French.

the nose presented an aquiline silhouette which recalled the Oriental or Jewish type. His hands—thin, bony, veined, full of sinews stretched like the strings on the neck of a violin, and armed with talons resembling those which terminate the membranous wings of a bat—shook with a senile movement disquieting to see. But those feverishly nail-bitten hands became firmer than lobster-claws or steel pincers when they lifted some precious piece—an onyx carving, a Venetian cup, or a plate of Bohemian crystal. This old rascal had an aspect so profoundly rabbinical and cabalistic that three centuries ago they would have burned him merely from the evidence of his face.

"Will you not buy something from me today, *Monsieur*? Here is a Malay kris with a blade undulating like a flame: see those grooves to serve as gutters for the blood, those teeth fashioned and set inversely so as to rip out the entrails when the dagger is withdrawn. It is a fine type of ferocious weapon, and would look very well among your trophies. This two-handed sword is very beautiful—it is a José de la Hera; and this *colichemarde* with perforated guard, what a superb piece of work!"

"No, I have plenty of arms and instruments of carnage. I want a figurine, something that would do for a paper-weight, for I can not endure those stock bronzes which the stationers sell, and which may be found on any desk.

The old gnome, foraging among his antiques, finally arranged before me several ancient bronzes; fragments of malachite; little Hindoo or Chinese idols, a kind of toys made of jade, showing the incarnation of Brahma or of Vishnu, marvelously well suited for the sufficiently ungodlike purpose of holding papers and letters in place.

I WAS hesitating between a porcelain dragon all starred with warts, its jaws adorned with tusks and bristling whiskers, and a highly abominable little Mexican fetish, representing the god Vitzliputzili naked, when I noticed a charming foot which I at first took for a fragment of an antique Venus.

It had those beautiful tawny and ruddy tints which give to Florentine bronze that warm and vivacious look so preferable to the grayish green tone of ordinary bronze, which might be taken for statues in putrefaction. Satiny lights frisked over its form, rounded and polished by the loving kisses of twenty centuries; for it seemed to be a Corinthian bronze, a work of the best era, perhaps a casting by Lysippus.

"This foot will be the thing for me," I said to the merchant, who regarded me with an ironical and gloomy air as he held out the desired object for me to examine at will.

I was surprized at its lightness; it was not a foot of metal, but indeed a foot of flesh, an embalmed foot, a foot of a mummy; on examining it still more closely one could see the grain of the skin, and the lines almost imperceptibly impressed upon it by the texture of the bandages. The toes were slender, delicate, terminated by perfect nails, pure and transparent as agates; the great toe, slightly separate, and contrasting happily with the modeling of the other toes, in the antique style, gave it an air of lightness, the grace of a bird's foot; the sole, scarcely streaked by several almost invisible grooves, showed that it had never touched the earth, and had come in contact with only the finest matting of Nile rushes and the softest carpets of panther skin.

"Ha, ha! You wish the foot of the Princess Hermonthis!" exclaimed the merchant, with a strange chuckle, fixing upon me his owlish eyes. "Ha, ha, ha! For a paper-weight! Original

idea! Artistic idea! If anyone would have said to old Pharaoh that the foot of his adored daughter would serve for a paper-weight, he would have been greatly surprized, for he had had a mountain of granite hollowed out to hold the triple coffin, painted and gilded and all covered with hieroglyphics and beautiful paintings of the Judgment of Souls," continued the singular little merchant, half aloud, as if talking to himself.

"How much will you charge me for this mummy fragment?"

"Ah, the highest price I am able, for it is a superb piece. If I had its counterpart, you could not have it for less than five hundred francs. The daughter of a Pharaoh—nothing is more rare!"

"Assuredly it is not common; but still, how much do you want? In the first place, let me tell you something, and that is, my entire treasure consists of only five louis: I can buy anything that costs five louis, but nothing dearer. You might search my innermost waistcoat pockets, and my most secret desk-drawers, without finding even one miserable five-franc piece more."

"Five louis for the foot of the Princess Hermonthis! That is very little, very little, in truth, for an authentic foot," muttered the merchant, shaking his head and rolling his eyes.

"All right, take it, and I will give you the bandages into the bargain," he added, wrapping it in an ancient damask rag. "Very fine: real damask, Indian damask, which has never been redyed; it is strong, it is soft," he mumbled, passing his fingers over the frayed tissue, from the commercial habit which moved him to praise an object of so little value that he himself judged it worth only being given away.

He poured the gold pieces into a sort of medieval alms-purse hanging at his belt, as he kept on saying:

"The foot of the Princess Hermonthis to serve as a paper-weight!"

Then, turning upon me his phosphorescent eyes, he exclaimed in a voice strident as the mewling of a cat that has swallowed a fishbone: "Old Pharaoh will not be pleased. He loved his daughter, that dear man!"

"You speak as if you were his contemporary; old as you are, you do not date back to the Pyramids of Egypt," I answered laughingly from the shop door.

I WENT home, well content with my acquisition. In order to put it to use as soon as possible, I placed the foot of the divine Princess Hermonthis upon a heap of papers, scribbled over with verses, an undecipherable mosaic work of erasures; articles just begun; letters forgotten and mailed in the table-drawer—an error which often occurs with absent-minded people. The whole effect was charming, bizarre, and romantic.

Well satisfied with this embellishment, I went down into the street with the becoming gravity and pride of one who feels that he has the ineffable advantage over all the passers-by whom he elbows, of possessing a fragment of the Princess Hermonthis, daughter of Pharaoh.

I looked upon all those persons as sovereignly ridiculous who did not possess, like myself, a paper-weight so notoriously Egyptian; and it seemed to me that the true occupation of every man of sense was to have a mummy's foot upon his desk.

Happily, my meeting some friends distracted me from my infatuation with the recent acquisition; I went to dinner with them, for it would have been difficult for me to dine by myself.

When I came back in the evening, my brain slightly confused by a few glasses of wine, a vague whiff of Oriental perfume delicately tickled my olfactory nerves: the heat of the

room had warmed the sodium carbonate, bitumen, and myrrh in which the parashites, who out open the bodies of the dead, had bathed the corpse of the princess; it was a perfume both sweet and penetrating, a perfume that four thousand years had not been able to dissipate.

The dream of Egypt was Eternity: her odors have the solidity of granite, and endure as long.

I soon drank to fulness from the black cup of sleep: for an hour or two all remained opaque. Oblivion and nothingness inundated me with their somber emptiness.

Presently my mental obscurity cleared; dreams commenced to graze me softly in their silent flight.

The eyes of my soul were opened, and I beheld my chamber precisely as it was. I might have believed myself to be awake, but a vague perception told me that I slept and that something fantastic was about to take place.

The odor of the myrrh had intensely increased, and I felt a slight headache, which I attributed to several glasses of champagne that we had drunk to the unknown gods, and our future success.

I peered through my room with a feeling of expectation which nothing actually justified; the furniture was precisely in place; the lamp burned upon its bracket, softly shaded by the milky whiteness of its dull crystal; the water-color sketches shone under their Bohemian glass; the curtains hung languidly: everything had an air slumbrous and tranquil.

Presently, however, this calm interior appeared to become troubled: the woodwork cracked furtively, the log enveloped in cinders suddenly emitted a jet of blue flame, and the circular ornaments on the frieze seemed like metallic eyes, watching, like myself, for the things which were about to happen.

My gaze by chance fell upon the desk where I had placed the foot of the Princess Hermonthis.

Instead of being immobile, as became a foot which had been embalmed for four thousand years, it moved uneasily, contracted itself and leaped over the papers like a frightened frog: one would have imagined it to be in contact with a galvanic battery. I could quite distinctly hear the dry sound made by its little heel, hard as the hoof of a gazelle.

I became somewhat discontented with my acquisition, preferring my paper-weights to be sedentary, and thought it a little unnatural that feet should walk about without legs; indeed, I began to feel something which strongly resembled fear.

Suddenly I saw the folds of one of my bed curtains stir, and I heard a bumping sound, like that of a person hopping on one foot. I must confess I became alternately hot and cold, I felt a strange wind blow across my back, and my suddenly rising hair caused my nightcap to execute a leap of several yards.

The bed-curtains parted, and I beheld coming toward me the strangest figure it is possible to imagine.

It was a young girl, of a deep olive complexion, like the bayadere Amani, of a perfect beauty, and recalling the purest Egyptian type. She had almond eyes with the corners raised, and brows so black that they seemed blue; her nose was delicately chiseled, almost Grecian in its fineness of outline, and indeed she might have been taken for a statue of Corinthian bronze had not the prominence of the cheekbones and the slightly African lips made it impossible not to recognize her as belonging beyond doubt to the hieroglyphic race of the banks of the Nile.

Her arms, slender and turned with the symmetry of a spindle—like those of very young girls—were encircled by a kind of metal bands and

bracelets of glass beads; her hair was plaited in cords; and upon her bosom was suspended a little idol of green paste, which, from its bearing a whip with seven lashes, enabled one to recognize it as an image of Isis, conductress of spirits. A disk of gold scintillated upon her brow, and a few traces of rouge relieved the coppery tint of her cheeks.

As for her costume, it was very strange. Imagine an under-wrapping of linen strips, bedizened with black and red hieroglyphics, stiffened with bitumen, and apparently belonging to a freshly unbandaged mummy.

In one of those flights of thought so frequent in dreams, I heard the rough falsetto of the bric-à-brac dealer, which repeated like a monotonous refrain the phrase he had uttered in his shop with an intonation so enigmatical: "Old Pharaoh will not be pleased—he loved his daughter, that dear man!"

Strange circumstance—and one which scarcely reassured me—the apparition had but one foot; the other was broken off at the ankle!

She approached the desk where the foot was moving and wriggling with redoubled liveliness. Once there, she supported herself upon the edge, and I saw tears form and grow pearly in her eyes.

Although she had not as yet spoken, I clearly discerned her thoughts: she looked at her foot—for it was indeed her own—with an infinitely graceful expression of coquettish sadness; but the foot leaped and coursed hither and yon, as if driven by steel springs.

Two or three times she extended her hand to seize it, but she did not succeed.

Then commenced between the Princess Hermonthis and her foot—which appeared to be endowed with a life of its own—a very fantastic dialogue in a most ancient Coptic dialect, such

as might have been spoken some thirty centuries ago by voices of the land of Ser: that night, luckily, I understood Coptic to perfection.

The Princess Hermonthis cried, in a voice sweet and vibrant as a crystal bell:

"Well, my dear little foot, you flee from me always, though I have taken good care of you. I bathed you with perfumed water in a basin of alabaster; I smoothed your heel with pumicestone mixed with oil of palms; your nails were cut with golden scissors and polished with a hippopotamus tooth; I was careful to select sandals for you, brodered and painted and turned up at the toes, which made all the young girls in Egypt envious; you wore on your great toe rings representing the sacred scarabæus, and you carried about the lightest body it was possible for a lazy foot to sustain."

The foot replied, in a tone pouting and chagrined: "You well know I do not belong to myself any longer. I have been bought and paid for. The old merchant knew perfectly what he was doing; he always bore you a grudge for having refused to espouse him: this is an ill turn which he has done you. The Arab who robbed your royal sarcophagus in the subterranean pits of the necropolis of Thebes was sent by him: he desired to prevent you from going to the reunion of the shadowy peoples in the cities below. Have you five pieces of gold for my ransom?"

"Alas, no! My jewels, my rings, my purses of gold and silver, were all stolen from me," answered the Princess Hermonthis, with a sigh.

"Princess," I then exclaimed, "I never retained anybody's foot unjustly; even though you have not got the five louis which it cost me, I give it to you gladly: I should be in despair to make so amiable a person as the Princess Hermonthis lame."

I delivered this discourse in a tone so royal and gallant that it must have astonished the beautiful Egyptian.

She turned toward me a look charged with gratitude, and her eyes shone with bluish gleams.

She took her foot—which, this time, let itself be taken—like a woman about to put on her little shoe, and adjusted it to her leg with much address.

This operation ended, she took two or three steps about the room, as if to assure herself that she really was no longer lame.

“Ah, how happy my father will be—he who was so desolated because of my mutilation, and who had, from the day of my birth, put a whole people at work to hollow out for me a tomb so deep that he would be able to preserve me intact until that supreme day when souls must be weighed in the balances of Amenthi! Come with me to my father—he will receive you well, for you have given me back my foot.”

I found this proposition natural enough. I enveloped myself in a dressing gown of large flowered pattern, which gave me a very Pharaohesque appearance, hurriedly put on a pair of Turkish slippers, and told the Princess Hermonthis that I was ready to follow her.

Hermonthis, before starting, took from her neck the tiny figurine of green paste and laid it on the scattered sheets of paper which covered the table.

“It is only fair,” she said smiling, “that I should replace your paper-weight.”

She gave me her hand, which was soft and cold, like the skin of a serpent, and we departed.

FOR some time we spun with the rapidity of an arrow through a fluid and grayish medium, in which faintly outlined silhouettes were passing to right and left.

For an instant, we saw only sea and sky.

Some minutes afterward, obelisks began to rise, porches and flights of steps guarded by sphinxes were outlined against the horizon.

We had arrived.

The princess conducted me toward the mountain of rosy granite, where we found an opening so narrow and low that it would have been difficult to distinguish it from the fissures in the rock, if two sculptured columns had not enabled us to recognize it.

Hermonthis lighted a torch and walked before me.

There were corridors hewn through the living rock; the walls, covered with hieroglyphic paintings and allegorical processions, might well have occupied thousands of hands for thousands of years; these corridors, of an interminable length, ended in square chambers, in the midst of which pits had been contrived, through which we descended by means of cramp-hooks or spiral stairways; these pits conducted us into other chambers, from which other corridors opened, decorated with painted sparrow-hawks, serpents coiled in circles, and those mystic symbols, the *tau*, the *pedum*, and the *bari*—prodigious works which no living eye would ever examine, endless legends in granite which only the dead have time to read throughout eternity.

At last we issued into a hall so vast, so enormous, so immeasurable, that the eye could not perceive its confines. Flooding the sight were files of monstrous columns between which twinkled livid stars of yellow flame, and these points of light revealed further incalculable depths.

The Princess Hermonthis always held me by the hand, and graciously saluted the mummies of her acquaintance.

My eyes accustomed themselves to the crepuscular light, and objects became discernible.

I beheld, seated upon their thrones, the kings of the subterranean races: they were magnificent, dry old men, withered, wrinkled, parchmented, blackened with naphtha and bitumen—all of them wore golden head-dresses, breastplates, and gorgets starry with precious stones, eyes of a sphinxlike fixity, and long beards whitened by the snows of the centuries. Behind them, their embalmed people stood, in the rigid and constrained pose of Egyptian art, preserving eternally the attitude prescribed by the hieratic code. Behind these peoples, contemporary cats mewed, ibises flapped their wings, and crocodiles grinned, all rendered still more monstrous by their swathing bands.

All the Pharaohs were there—Cheops, Chephrenes, Psammetichus, Sesostriis, Amenotaph—all the dark rulers of the pyramids and the nymphs. On the yet higher thrones sat King Chronos, Xixouthros, who was contemporary with the deluge; and Tubal Cain, who preceded it.

The beard of King Xixouthros had grown so full that it already wound seven times around the granite table upon which he leaned, lost in a somnolent reverie.

Farther back, through a dusty cloud across the dim centuries, I beheld vaguely the seventy-two preadamite kings, with their seventy-two peoples, forever passed away.

After allowing me to gaze upon this astounding spectacle a few minutes, the Princess Hermonthis presented me to Pharaoh, her father, who vouchsafed me a majestic nod.

"I have recovered my foot again! I have recovered my foot!" cried the princess, as she clapped her little hands one against the other with all the signs of playful joy. "Here is the gentleman who restored it to me."

The races of Kemi, the races of Nahasi, all the black, bronze, and cop-

per-colored nations, repeated in chorus: "The Princess Hermonthis has recovered her foot!"

Even Xixouthros was visibly affected: he raised his dull eyelids, passed his fingers over his mustache, and bent upon me his look, weighty with centuries.

"By Oms, the dog of Hell, and by Tmei, daughter of the Sun and of Truth, there is a brave and worthy fellow!" exclaimed Pharaoh, extending toward me his scepter, terminated with a lotus-flower. "What do you desire for recompense?"

Strong in that audacity which is inspired by dreams, where nothing seems impossible, I asked the hand of Hermonthis: the hand seemed to me a very proper recompense for such a good foot.

Pharaoh opened wide his eyes of glass, astonished by my pleasantry and my request.

"From what country do you come, and what is your age?"

"I am a Frenchman, and I am twenty-seven years old, venerable Pharaoh."

"Twenty-seven years old—and he wishes to espouse the Princess Hermonthis, who is thirty centuries old!" exclaimed at once all the thrones and all the circles of nations.

Hermonthis alone did not seem to find my request unreasonable.

"If only you were even two thousand years old," replied the ancient king. "I would quite willingly give you the princess; but the disproportion is too great; and, besides, we must give our daughters husbands who are durable—you no longer know how to preserve yourselves: the oldest people that you can produce are scarcely fifteen hundred years old, and they are no more than a pinch of dust. See here—my flesh is hard as basalt, my bones are bars of steel!

"I shall be present on the last day

of the world with the body and the features which were mine in life; my daughter Hermonthis will endure longer than a statue of bronze.

"Then the winds will have dispersed the last particles of your dust, and Isis herself, who was able to recover the atoms of Osiris, would be embarrassed to recompose your being.

"See how vigorous I still am, and how well my hands can grip," he said to me as he shook my hand in the English manner, so hard that he cut my fingers with my rings.

He squeezed me so hard that I awoke, and found it was my friend Alfred who was shaking me by the arm to make me get up.

"**A**H, you maddening sleepyhead! Must I have you carried out into the middle of the street, and fireworks exploded in your ears? It's afternoon; don't you remember that you promised to take me with you to see Monsieur Aguado's Spanish pictures?"

"*Mon Dieu!* I didn't remember it any more!" I answered as I dressed myself. "We will go there at once; I have the permit here on my desk."

I went forward to take it; but judge of my astonishment when instead of the mummy's foot I had purchased the evening before, I saw the tiny figurine of green paste left in its place by the Princess Hermonthis!
