

## A SOUL IN HELL

It was nearly ten o'clock at night when I cast myself down upon my bed, and began to gather my scattered wits, and reflect upon what I had seen and heard. But the more I reflected the less I could make of it. Was I mad, or drunk, or dreaming, or was I merely the victim of a gigantic and most elaborate hoax? How was it possible that I, a rational man, not unacquainted with the leading scientific facts of our history, and hitherto an absolute and utter disbeliever in all the hocus-pocus which in Europe goes by the name of the supernatural, could believe that I had within the last few minutes been engaged in conversation with a woman two thousand and odd years old? The thing was contrary to the experience of human nature, and absolutely and utterly impossible. It must be a hoax, and yet, if it were a hoax, what was I to make of it? What, too, was to be said of the figures on the water, of the woman's extraordinary acquaintance with the remote past, and her ignorance, or apparent ignorance, of any subsequent history? What, too, of her wonderful and awful loveliness? This, at any rate, was a patent fact, and beyond the experience of the world. No merely mortal woman could shine with such a supernatural radiance. About that she had, at any rate, been in the right--it was not safe for any man to look upon such beauty. I was a hardened vessel in such matters, having, with the exception of one painful experience of my green and tender youth, put the softer sex (I sometimes think that this is a misnomer) almost entirely out of my

thoughts. But now, to my intense horror, I knew that I could never put away the vision of those glorious eyes; and alas! the very diablerie of the woman, whilst it horrified and repelled, attracted in even a greater degree. A person with the experience of two thousand years at her back, with the command of such tremendous powers, and the knowledge of a mystery that could hold off death, was certainly worth falling in love with, if ever woman was. But, alas! it was not a question of whether or no she was worth it, for so far as I could judge, not being versed in such matters, I, a fellow of my college, noted for what my acquaintances are pleased to call my misogyny, and a respectable man now well on in middle life, had fallen absolutely and hopelessly in love with this white sorceress. Nonsense; it must be nonsense! She had warned me fairly, and I had refused to take the warning. Curses on the fatal curiosity that is ever prompting man to draw the veil from woman, and curses on the natural impulse that begets it! It is the cause of half--ay, and more than half--of our misfortunes. Why cannot man be content to live alone and be happy, and let the women live alone and be happy too? But perhaps they would not be happy, and I am not sure that we should either. Here is a nice state of affairs. I, at my age, to fall a victim to this modern Circe! But then she was not modern, at least she said not. She was almost as ancient as the original Circe.

I tore my hair, and jumped up from my couch, feeling that if I did not do something I should go off my head. What did she mean about the scarabæus too? It was Leo's scarabæus, and had come out of the old coffer that Vincey had left in my rooms nearly one-and-twenty years

before. Could it be, after all, that the whole story was true, and the writing on the sherd was not a forgery, or the invention of some crack-brained, long-forgotten individual? And if so, could it be that Leo was the man that She was waiting for--the dead man who was to be born again! Impossible! The whole thing was gibberish! Who ever heard of a man being born again?

But if it were possible that a woman could exist for two thousand years, this might be possible also--anything might be possible. I myself might, for aught I knew, be a reincarnation of some other forgotten self, or perhaps the last of a long line of ancestral selves. Well, vive la guerre! why not? Only, unfortunately, I had no recollection of these previous conditions. The idea was so absurd to me that I burst out laughing, and, addressing the sculptured picture of a grim-looking warrior on the cave wall, called out to him aloud, "Who knows, old fellow?--perhaps I was your contemporary. By Jove! perhaps I was you and you are I," and then I laughed again at my own folly, and the sound of my laughter rang dismally along the vaulted roof, as though the ghost of the warrior had echoed the ghost of a laugh.

Next I bethought me that I had not been to see how Leo was, so, taking up one of the lamps which was burning at my bedside, I slipped off my shoes and crept down the passage to the entrance of his sleeping cave. The draught of the night air was lifting his curtain to and fro gently, as though spirit hands were drawing and redrawing it. I slid into the vault-like apartment, and looked round. There was a light by which I

could see that Leo was lying on the couch, tossing restlessly in his fever, but asleep. At his side, half-lying on the floor, half-leaning against the stone couch, was Ustane. She held his hand in one of hers, but she too was dozing, and the two made a pretty, or rather a pathetic, picture. Poor Leo! his cheek was burning red, there were dark shadows beneath his eyes, and his breath came heavily. He was very, very ill; and again the horrible fear seized me that he might die, and I be left alone in the world. And yet if he lived he would perhaps be my rival with Ayesha; even if he were not the man, what chance should I, middle-aged and hideous, have against his bright youth and beauty? Well, thank Heaven! my sense of right was not dead. She had not killed that yet; and, as I stood there, I prayed to Heaven in my heart that my boy, my more than son, might live--ay, even if he proved to be the man.

Then I went back as softly as I had come, but still I could not sleep; the sight and thought of dear Leo lying there so ill had but added fuel to the fire of my unrest. My wearied body and overstrained mind awakened all my imagination into preternatural activity. Ideas, visions, almost inspirations, floated before it with startling vividness. Most of them were grotesque enough, some were ghastly, some recalled thoughts and sensations that had for years been buried in the débris of my past life. But, behind and above them all, hovered the shape of that awful woman, and through them gleamed the memory of her entrancing loveliness. Up and down the cave I strode--up and down.

Suddenly I observed, what I had not noticed before, that there was a

narrow aperture in the rocky wall. I took up the lamp and examined it; the aperture led to a passage. Now, I was still sufficiently sensible to remember that it is not pleasant, in such a situation as ours was, to have passages running into one's bed-chamber from no one knows where. If there are passages, people can come up them; they can come up when one is asleep. Partly to see where it went to, and partly from a restless desire to be doing something, I followed the passage. It led to a stone stair, which I descended; the stair ended in another passage, or rather tunnel, also hewn out of the bed-rock, and running, so far as I could judge, exactly beneath the gallery that led to the entrance of our rooms, and across the great central cave. I went on down it: it was as silent as the grave, but still, drawn by some sensation or attraction that I cannot define, I followed on, my stockinged feet falling without noise on the smooth and rocky floor. When I had traversed some fifty yards of space, I came to another passage running at right angles, and here an awful thing happened to me: the sharp draught caught my lamp and extinguished it, leaving me in utter darkness in the bowels of that mysterious place. I took a couple of strides forward so as to clear the bisecting tunnel, being terribly afraid lest I should turn up it in the dark if once I got confused as to the direction, and then paused to think. What was I to do? I had no match; it seemed awful to attempt that long journey back through the utter gloom, and yet I could not stand there all night, and, if I did, probably it would not help me much, for in the bowels of the rock it would be as dark at midday as at midnight. I looked back over my shoulder--not a sight or a sound. I peered forward into the darkness: surely, far away, I saw something like the faint glow

of fire. Perhaps it was a cave where I could get a light--at any rate, it was worth investigating. Slowly and painfully I crept along the tunnel, keeping my hand against its wall, and feeling at every step with my foot before I put it down, fearing lest I should fall into some pit. Thirty paces--there was a light, a broad light that came and went, shining through curtains! Fifty paces--it was close at hand! Sixty--oh, great heaven!

I was at the curtains, and they did not hang close, so I could see clearly into the little cavern beyond them. It had all the appearance of being a tomb, and was lit up by a fire that burnt in its centre with a whitish flame and without smoke. Indeed, there, to the left, was a stone shelf with a little ledge to it three inches or so high, and on the shelf lay what I took to be a corpse; at any rate, it looked like one, with something white thrown over it. To the right was a similar shelf, on which lay some brodered coverings. Over the fire bent the figure of a woman; she was sideways to me and facing the corpse, wrapped in a dark mantle that hid her like a nun's cloak. She seemed to be staring at the flickering flame. Suddenly, as I was trying to make up my mind what to do, with a convulsive movement that somehow gave an impression of despairing energy, the woman rose to her feet and cast the dark cloak from her.

It was She herself!

She was clothed, as I had seen her when she unveiled, in the kirtle of

clinging white, cut low upon her bosom, and bound in at the waist with the barbaric double-headed snake, and, as before, her rippling black hair fell in heavy masses down her back. But her face was what caught my eye, and held me as in a vice, not this time by the force of its beauty, but by the power of fascinated terror. The beauty was still there, indeed, but the agony, the blind passion, and the awful vindictiveness displayed upon those quivering features, and in the tortured look of the upturned eyes, were such as surpass my powers of description.

For a moment she stood still, her hands raised high above her head, and as she did so the white robe slipped from her down to her golden girdle, baring the blinding loveliness of her form. She stood there, her fingers clenched, and the awful look of malevolence gathered and deepened on her face.

Suddenly I thought of what would happen if she discovered me, and the reflection made me turn sick and faint. But, even if I had known that I must die if I stopped, I do not believe that I could have moved, for I was absolutely fascinated. But still I knew my danger. Supposing she should hear me, or see me through the curtain, supposing I even sneezed, or that her magic told her that she was being watched--swift indeed would be my doom.

Down came the clenched hands to her sides, then up again above her head, and, as I am a living and honourable man, the white flame of the fire leapt up after them, almost to the roof, throwing a fierce and ghastly

glare upon She herself, upon the white figure beneath the covering,  
and every scroll and detail of the rockwork.

Down came the ivory arms again, and as they did so she spoke, or rather  
hissed, in Arabic, in a note that curdled my blood, and for a second  
stopped my heart.

"Curse her, may she be everlastingly accursed."

The arms fell and the flame sank. Up they went again, and the broad  
tongue of fire shot up after them; and then again they fell.

"Curse her memory--accursed be the memory of the Egyptian."

Up again, and again down.

"Curse her, the daughter of the Nile, because of her beauty.

"Curse her, because her magic hath prevailed against me.

"Curse her, because she held my beloved from me."

And again the flame dwindled and shrank.

She put her hands before her eyes, and abandoning the hissing tone,  
cried aloud:--



"What is the use of cursing?--she prevailed, and she is gone."

Then she recommenced with an even more frightful energy:--

"Curse her where she is. Let my curses reach her where she is and disturb her rest.

"Curse her through the starry spaces. Let her shadow be accursed.

"Let my power find her even there.

"Let her hear me even there. Let her hide herself in the blackness.

"Let her go down into the pit of despair, because I shall one day find her."

Again the flame fell, and again she covered her eyes with her hands.

"It is of no use--no use," she wailed; "who can reach those who sleep? Not even I can reach them."

Then once more she began her unholy rites.

"Curse her when she shall be born again. Let her be born accursed.

"Let her be utterly accused from the hour of her birth until sleep finds her.

"Yea, then, let her be accursed; for then shall I overtake her with my vengeance, and utterly destroy her."

And so on. The flame rose and fell, reflecting itself in her agonised eyes; the hissing sound of her terrible maledictions, and no words of mine can convey how terrible they were, ran round the walls and died away in little echoes, and the fierce light and deep gloom alternated themselves on the white and dreadful form stretched upon that bier of stone.

But at length she seemed to wear herself out and cease. She sat herself down upon the rocky floor, shook the dense cloud of her beautiful hair over her face and breast, and began to sob terribly in the torture of a heartrending despair.

"Two thousand years," she moaned--"two thousand years have I wanted and endured; but though century doth still creep on to century, and time give place to time, the sting of memory hath not lessened, the light of hope doth not shine more bright. Oh! to have lived two thousand years, with all my passion eating out my heart, and with my sin ever before me. Oh, that for me life cannot bring forgetfulness! Oh, for the weary years that have been and are yet to come, and evermore to come, endless and without end!

"My love! my love! my love! Why did that stranger bring thee back to me after this sort? For five hundred years I have not suffered thus. Oh, if I sinned against thee, have I not wiped away the sin? When wilt thou come back to me who have all, and yet without thee have naught? What is there that I can do? What? What? What? And perchance she--perchance that Egyptian doth abide with thee where thou art, and mock my memory. Oh, why could I not die with thee, I who slew thee? Alas, that I cannot die! Alas! Alas!" and she flung herself prone upon the ground, and sobbed and wept till I thought her heart must burst.

Suddenly she ceased, raised herself to her feet, rearranged her robe, and, tossing back her long locks impatiently, swept across to where the figure lay upon the stone.

"Oh Kallikrates," she cried, and I trembled at the name, "I must look upon thy face again, though it be agony. It is a generation since I looked upon thee whom I slew--slew with mine own hand," and with trembling fingers she seized the corner of the sheet-like wrapping that covered the form upon the stone bier, and then paused. When she spoke again, it was in a kind of awed whisper, as though her idea were terrible even to herself.

"Shall I raise thee," she said, apparently addressing the corpse, "so that thou standest there before me, as of old? I can do it," and she held out her hands over the sheeted dead, while her whole frame became

rigid and terrible to see, and her eyes grew fixed and dull. I shrank in horror behind the curtain, my hair stood up upon my head, and, whether it was my imagination or a fact I am unable to say, but I thought that the quiet form beneath the covering began to quiver, and the winding sheet to lift as though it lay on the breast of one who slept. Suddenly she withdrew her hands, and the motion of the corpse seemed to me to cease.

"To what purpose?" she said gloomily. "Of what good is it to recall the semblance of life when I cannot recall the spirit? Even if thou stoodest before me thou wouldst not know me, and couldst but do what I bid thee. The life in thee would be my life, and not thy life, Kallikrates."

For a moment she stood there brooding, and then cast herself down on her knees beside the form, and began to press her lips against the sheet, and weep. There was something so horrible about the sight of this awe-inspiring woman letting loose her passion on the dead--so much more horrible even than anything that had gone before--that I could no longer bear to look at it, and, turning, began to creep, shaking as I was in every limb, slowly along the pitch-dark passage, feeling in my trembling heart that I had seen a vision of a Soul in Hell.

On I stumbled, I scarcely know how. Twice I fell, once I turned up the bisecting passage, but fortunately found out my mistake in time. For twenty minutes or more I crept along, till at last it occurred to me that I must have passed the little stair by which I had descended. So,

utterly exhausted, and nearly frightened to death, I sank down at length there on the stone flooring, and sank into oblivion.

When I came to I noticed a faint ray of light in the passage just behind me. I crept to it, and found it was the little stair down which the weak dawn was stealing. Passing up it, I gained my chamber in safety, and, flinging myself on the couch, was soon lost in slumber or rather stupor.