

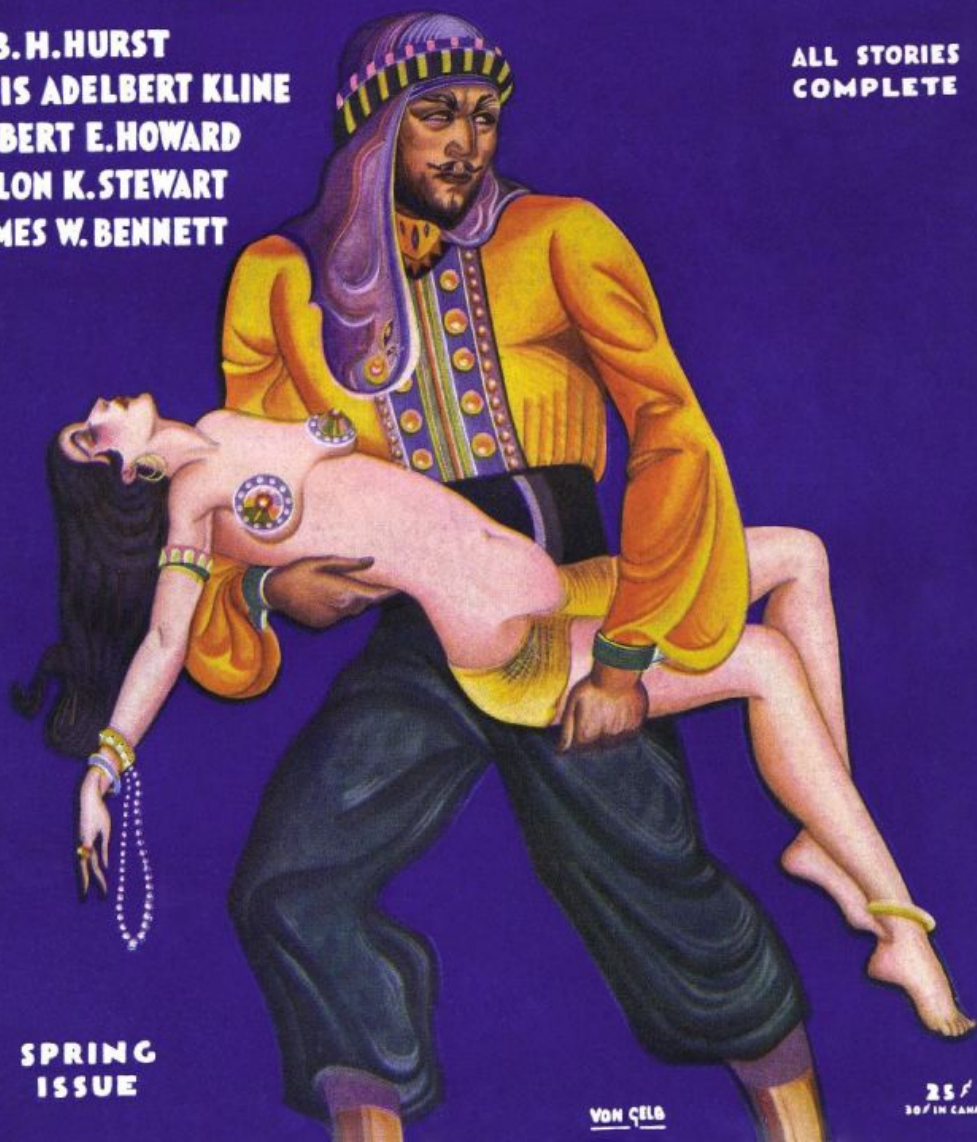
FASCINATING TALES OF THE EAST

# ORIENTAL STORIES



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# The Dragoman's Secret

By

OTIS ADELBERT KLINE

*Khallaf the Strong inflicted dire tortures on Hamed the Attar, and would have done him to death*

I have found that there are but three kinds of women in the world, *effendi*: those whose memory readily departs from us; those whose memory we deliberately put away from us; and those who, were we to live beyond the age of a thousand, we could never forget.

Such a woman was Mariam—a pearl of great price and a jewel among a million—yet for that she was not of the true faith, I nightly ask Allah to forgive me for cherishing her memory. I have had many singular and startling adventures, but none to quite compare with those which befell me when Mariam came into my life.

You would hear the tale, *effendi*? It is one which I have never dared relate to a Moslem; yet I have longed, these many years, to unbosom myself to an understanding friend. You are of a different faith, and might sympathize. But can I trust you with the secret?

Well then, here is the coffee shop at Silat, where we can sit in privacy and comfort, away from the glare of the noonday sun.

Ho, Silat! Two *shishas* stuffed to overflowing with the best Syrian leaf, and coffee, bitter as aloes, black as a Nubian at midnight, and hot as the hinges of *Johannim's* innermost gate.

*Aihee!* You, who know me as Hamed bin Ayyub, the bent and wrinkled dragoman, should have seen me in the days of my youth—tall and straight as a Rudaynian lance, with hair of raven blackness, a bold and handsome countenance, and the heart of a lion. Those were the days when rare and interesting adventures befell me.

As I told you, *effendi*, I have at times attained considerable wealth. There was one time when, through a series of singular circumstances, I fell heir to the wealth, the home, and the beautiful slave girl of a rich young goldsmith.

For two years I lived with her in great joy and happiness, at the end of which time she bore me a daughter. But when she presented me with the child, Allah saw fit to receive my beloved into His clemency.

As I was unable to care for the child, I fared with her to the house of my uncle, who graciously took her into his *harim*, and whose women gave her loving care. Then, as my bosom was constricted with sorrow, and my mind so distracted with grief that I no longer had the power of peace, I sold my house and all that it contained, and having converted all my wealth into gold, purchased a camel with a *shugduf* litter and left the city for the purpose of making the pilgrimage to Mecca.



“Now, my loud-talking youth,” he said, “we’ll have your tongue in a minute.”

The Jerusalem caravan had already departed, but the great caravan from Damascus was on its way, and I knew that by crossing El Ghor, the Jordan, and camping for a day or two on the Hajj Road until it came up, I would be able to join it.

But alas for the plans of men when they run contrary to the will of Allah Almighty. It was written that I should not complete my pilgrimage, for the first day of my journey had not yet ended when I was beset by a band of fierce *harami*, whose contemptible livelihood is gained by plundering honest men.

I drew my simitar and fought desperately, sending two of their black souls to scorch in *Johannim*. But I was tumbled from my camel by a cowardly blow from behind which laid my head open, and would have split it as a knife divides a melon had not my turban been stuffed with gold pieces.

Not content with taking my camel and my treasure, those greedy and murderous dogs actually stripped the clothing from my body, leaving me naked and apparently dying, as food for the vultures and jackals. In this condition I swooned away.

---

When my senses returned to me, I first became conscious of a swaying, lurching motion, which apprised me that I was riding on the back of a camel.

I opened my eyes, and my senses whirled and were like to leave me once more at what I beheld. For bending over me, her gaze solicitous and tender, was a ravishingly beautiful

young girl. Her eyes were twin stars of loveliness. The purity and whiteness of her alabaster brow put the beauty of the crescent moon to shame. Her cheeks combined the velvety softness of the peach with the delicate tint of new-blown roses. And her lips were redder than new wine, with seductive curves that were more intoxicating.

But my eyes were not destined to feast on her loveliness for more than a moment, for as soon as she saw that my senses had returned she quickly veiled her face with a blush of becoming modesty.

I closed my eyes once more, pretending to sleep, but glancing at her from time to time beneath my lowered lids. Upon finding that I could not beguile her into lowering her veil by this subterfuge, I was about to give off shamming and speak to her, when there suddenly resounded near at hand the wild shouts of raiders, mingled with the reports of firearms and the clash of blades.

The girl gave a little scream of terror as the curtain of the litter was ripped aside by a huge black hand, and a giant eunuch, longer than lumber and broader than a bench, mounted on a tall dromedary with magnificent trappings, leered in at us, rolling the whites of his eyes horribly, his blubber lips drawn back in a hideous grin.

“*Salam aleykum*, Mariam Khatun,” he mouthed. “I, Suwayd, the humble slave of Khallaf al Tamim, bring you greetings from my illustrious master.”

“Back to your master, black dog!” she retorted. “Tell him that I am not for such desert scum as he, nor do I fear him. Let him release my servants and permit me to resume my journey, and all will be overlooked. But if he persist in his evil intentions, then will death morn with him in the morning and night with him in the night, nor will he or those who ride with him, live long to boast of this foul misdeed.”

The eunuch chuckled contemptuously.

“Not for nothing is my master named ‘Khallaf al Tamim,’” he said. “Khallaf the Strong takes what pleases him without fear or favor. He but sent his humble slave to ascertain if you were really the Lady Mariam.”

So saying, he suddenly tore off her face veil.

During this conversation I had been lying back on my side of the litter, unnoticed by the eunuch, but at sight of this outrage, Allah vouchsafed me strength to sit up. Jerking the veil from his grasp and catching him by the throat, I said:

“For this base act, O ugly abortion of a mangy hyena, you die!”

“Not by your hand, O whelp of a rabid wolf!” he replied, easily twisting my hand away and then jerking me across the girl’s lap and completely out of the litter. Weakened as I was by the loss of blood from my wound, I was as a babe in the hands of the black giant, who bent me back over his knees and coolly drew his *jambiyah* to slit my throat.

At this moment there rode up beside us a huge, dark-skinned, black-bearded fellow, nearly as large as the eunuch who held me, and almost as black. He was richly dressed, and armed to the teeth, and bestrode a milk-white she-dromedary worth a small fortune in any *souk* in the land. I recognized him instantly from his description as Khallaf al Tamim, a *Jabarti* or Moslem Abyssinian, leader of a band of desperate cutthroats whose depredations were spoken of with awe and trembling wherever men gathered. He was reputed to have a large and magnificent *harim* in Hail, and to be under the protection of the Sharif of the Wahabis.

“What is that, Suwayd, which you have pulled from the litter of the Lady Mariam?” he asked.

"A cowardly son of flight who crept in to hide," replied the eunuch with the keen blade of his weapon against my gullet.

"A moment, Suwayd," said Khallaf. "I will tell you when to cut his throat. Let us first learn who he is."

The eunuch, who was evidently a blood-thirsty villain, mumbled something to himself, and his master reined his white dromedary between us and the litter. Lifting the curtain, he looked in, and I observed that Mariam had replaced her face-veil.

"Allah's peace and blessing upon you, Mariam Khatun," he said deferentially. "Your slave, Khallaf al Tamim, would learn if the life of this young dog of a *Badawi* is of value to you."

"No peace and no welcome to you, O black African monkey," she replied spiritedly. "Release him and those of my slaves and followers your scurvy cutthroats have left alive, that I may resume my journey."

"That I can not do, O lady," replied Khallaf, "much as it grieves me, your love-slave, to disobey your lightest wish. I have been commanded by the Sharif Nureddin Yusuf to bring you to Hail to stand trial for sorcery, heresy and proselyting among those of the one and true faith."

"You lie, O Jackal of Abyssinia!" she retorted. "This raid is of your own choosing and for your own purpose."

The brow of Khallaf contracted.

"Your sorcery has told you this, my lady," he said. "I will admit, then, that this expedition is of my choosing. And the reason is that, disguised as a eunuch, I saw you in the *hammam* in Jerusalem, whither I had gone in feigned attendance on one of my female slaves to learn why my women who visited the baths were so impressed by your beauty. It was there I became your love-slave, and there I resolved to possess you. And though Khallaf the Strong takes that which he desires, yet would he prefer that you come to him willingly."

"Neither willingly nor unwillingly shall Khallaf al Tamim possess me," she replied.

"For the present," he replied, "we will let it rest at that. Women are prone to change their minds with the shifting of the winds. But you have not answered my question. Is it your wish that this hider behind your skirts be kept alive?"

"He is nothing to me," she answered, "yet I would be merciful, even to a dog."

"The quality of mercy," replied Khallaf, "is an attribute of Almighty Allah. Humbler creatures, I among them, seldom possess it. Ho, Suwayd! You will take this pig away and slit his throat."

Weakened though I was, I began struggling violently in the grasp of the huge Nubian, feeling that the hour for my death had indeed come. It was true that I was nothing to this girl but a penniless, helpless wayfarer whom she had befriended, so why should she, who did not wish to be placed in the position of asking a favor from Khallaf, sue for my life?

But my struggles were as futile as though I had been a bird in the jaws of a serpent. With a grin of fiendish joy, Suwayd turned his beast to haul me a little way off, that I might not be slain within sight of the girl.

But we had scarcely started ere there came a cry from the litter of the Lady Mariam.

"Stop! Do not slay him."

"Oh, ho!" said Khallaf, with a knowing grin. "And what is this dog to you?"

"He is—he is my brother," she faltered. "Two days ago he was wounded by raiding bandits, and I have been caring for him in my litter, on the march."

“Your brother!” he sneered. “A likely story! You who are a seventh daughter of a seventh daughter!” He shouted to a dirty, unkempt robber with a hennaed beard who stood a little way off. “Ho there, Humayd! Bring me one of the prisoners.”

A moment later, the redbear rode up, leading a *Badawin* cameleer by a rope, looped around his neck.

“Mark well what I ask you, slave,” roared Khallaf, glaring down at the prisoner, “and speak only truth if you would not die where you stand.”

“I hear and I obey,” replied the cameleer, shaking with fright.

“Then tell me the name of this prisoner?” thundered the *Jabarti*, pointing a black finger at me.

“Alas, my lord, I know it not!” quavered the cameleer. “Two days ago we found him, sorely wounded, and robbed of all his possessions, lying naked and unconscious on the trail near the Hajj Road. My mistress took pity on him, and ordered that we clothe him from our stores and place him in her litter, that she might care for him.”

“So! We begin to get the truth!” grinned Khallaf. “Take him away, Humayd.”

He swung on me. “Your name, dog!” he demanded.

“You name me a dog,” I replied defiantly, “so let that name suffice you, though I am not of your mongrel breed.”

“What! You yap at me, cur? Well then, you shall have the treatment of any dog who snarls at his captor. Bind his hands, Suwayd. Then let him walk beside your beast with a rope around his neck. And if he falls——”

The big Nubian grinned knowingly. Then he made his dromedary kneel, none too gently bound my hands, and put a noose around my neck. Though I was so weak I staggered like a man drugged with drink, I was dragged away with the caravan, knowing that to fall would be to die.

2

Staggering, stumbling, choking in the dust from a hundred camels’ hooves, I managed to keep my feet as I walked beside the mount of the huge eunuch with a rope around my neck. My wounded head throbbed unmercifully, and I was constantly assailed by a terrific thirst, incited by my wound and augmented by the rays of the sun which beat down from the steel-blue sky with terrific heat. And to add to my afflictions, fierce biting flies and pestiferous gnats made merry with my unprotected face and hands.

The caravan stopped at noon, and I, who had been traveling on will-power alone, fell into a merciful unconsciousness. Had I been forced to continue but a few moments longer, my life had been forfeit by the rope.

When my senses came to me once more it was evening. I was lying, unbound, among the other prisoners. They offered me coffee and freshly baked bread, which I took gratefully. After I had eaten, the cameleer who had been questioned by Khallaf, lent me his *chibuk* and a pinch of tobacco. After smoking, I returned the pipe to its owner, and pillowing my head on my arm, fell asleep beside the fading embers of the fire.

It seemed that I had not slept more than a moment, when I was aroused, bound, haltered, and led away once more by Suwayd, the eunuch.

My strength had been increased by food and rest, and the night was cool, for which I thanked Almighty Allah as I trudged along with the caravan.

We traveled until dawn, prayed the dawn prayer, made coffee and bread, and after a brief rest, pressed onward until noon.

For many days and nights we continued thus, traveling from midnight until noon, and resting from noon until midnight. At the end of that time, we came to Hail, the Wahabi stronghold in the midst of the Nefud desert.

During all this time I had not been permitted to see or speak to my beautiful young benefactress. But she was constantly in my thoughts, nor did I wonder that Khallaf, or any other man who had seen her charms, had become her love-slave, for I was more sorely smitten than ever before or since. If, when I have been received into the mercy of Allah, I find a *Huriyah* of the Virgins of Paradise, who is but half as beautiful as she, then will I be content, and praise Allah forever.

We were hurried to the house of Khallaf, and I down to a damp and evil-smelling cell in the night-black dungeon beneath it.

I was well aware of the fact that the Abyssinian ruffian would not have kept me alive for a moment, had he not thought to fit me into his plans. He believed that my life was of value to Mariam—that by threatening her with my death he might win her consent if not her desire, to enter his *harim*.

And so I laid a plan of my own. I did not know to what length the girl might go to save my miserable life. I did know that she had condescended to request it of this black monster whom she despised, and that I was thus twice beholden to her for my very existence. Being a man of honor, there were but two things for me to do in the circumstances. I must either escape from Khallaf, or take my own life. My plans were made accordingly.

The only entrance to the dungeon was guarded by an aged, hook-nosed, gray-bearded Wahabi, who spent much of his time sitting on the bottom step of the stairway, smoking his *chibuk*. At irregular intervals he patrolled the corridor, casting the yellow rays of his lantern into each of the cells and examining the inmates.

I waited until I judged it must be near midnight, then went to the bars of my cell and waited for him to make his next inspection. He came, presently, shuffling along in his loose slippers and puffing at his *chibuk*. He started back a little when he saw me staring at him through the bars, but I called to him reassuringly.

“Come close, uncle. I have a message for your ears alone.”

“What dark secrets you have, keep to yourself, O pig who prays without washing,” he replied.

“Nay, but good uncle,” I persisted, “this is to your advantage, but it would not be were I to shout it through the corridors.”

At this, he came a trifle closer.

“I have here,” I said, indicating my handkerchief, a corner of which I had knotted and thrust into my sash, “a precious jewel worth a king’s ransom—a jewel that will buy you your heart’s desire, be it whatsoever it may.”

“You lie,” he mouthed, but an avaricious gleam had crept into his eyes, and I knew that he half believed me. “But had you such a jewel, what would that profit me?”

“Come closer and I will tell you,” I replied.

He stepped up more closely and I drew the handkerchief from my sash.

“The jewel for my freedom,” I whispered to him.

“First let me see it,” he replied, holding the lantern high.

“Here, look for yourself,” I said, and thrust both hands through the bars of my cell door, extending the handkerchief toward him and making as if I were endeavoring to undo the knot.



He bent over eagerly, holding the lantern still higher. In a trice I had the handkerchief twisted around his neck, the ends drawn taut, so that he could not cry out, but only made queer, gurgling noises.

“The door!” I said, fiercely. “Unlock it quickly, and do not reach for your simitar or cry out—or you die!”

He fumbled for the key, while I gave him just enough air to keep him conscious, and presently finding it, inserted it in the lock and turned it. As the door swung inward, I dragged the half-choked guard in with it.

To bind and gag him, and take his simitar, was but the work of a moment. I then locked him in the cell, picked up his lantern and quickly made my way up the stairs.

On reaching the top of the stairs, I cautiously opened the door a little way. Just in front of me was a hallway, at one side of which a fat *bowab* snored on a low *diwan*. Beyond him was the door which I knew led into the garden.

Leaving my lantern behind and drawing my simitar, I edged past the door. Closing it softly behind me and watching the *bowab* with bated breath, I tiptoed to the next door. It was closed by a huge bar, which I succeeded in sliding back without noise. Then I opened it, stepped out into the night, and closed it noiselessly.

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The garden was bathed in moonlight, and the sweet scent of blossoms was like a breath of Paradise after the stench of the dungeon from which I had just escaped. I was thirsty, and in the center of the garden a fountain splashed musically. But I forgot its allure when I saw a tall figure, carrying a long rifle, arise from beside it and slowly walk toward the garden gate.

Crouching low, I crept through the shrubbery until I was beside the path along which the guard was sauntering. His crunching footfalls drew nearer—passed me. The path was bordered with whitewashed stones. One of these I caught up, and leaping out behind him, brought it down on his head. His knees crumpled under him, and he fell in a heap. I caught his rifle to prevent the noise of its falling, and laid it beside him.

Divesting him of his head-cloth and burnoose, I donned them, and taking up his rifle, walked to the gate. I stood there for a moment, leaning on the rifle and looking about as a guard might have done, but seeing no one in the garden, I quickly slid back the bar and stepped out into the street.

Once out of the garden, I walked swiftly, not knowing in what direction I was going, but bent on putting as much distance as possible between me and the house of Khallaf before my escape should be discovered.

Scarcely had I passed the limit of the garden wall, ere I met a stranger, who saluted me with the “*Salam*,” and asked if I could direct him to the house of Khallaf. Afraid to arouse his suspicions by hurrying on, I paused to answer his question.

But at this moment I heard a stealthy footfall behind me, and knew that I was in a trap. I tried to whirl and engage my unseen antagonist, but a heavy, evil-smelling sack was drawn over my head and arms, and I was thrown to the ground. Then my hands and feet were securely bound, and I was carried for a short distance up a few steps and through a door into a building where the footfalls of my abductors echoed hollowly, as if it were unfurnished.

One of my captors greeted some one with the words: “*Ishtar Baraket*,” which means: “Ishtar bless thee,” and was answered in kind. Then I knew that I was not in the hands of godly men, but had fallen into the clutches of idolaters and casters of magic spells.

Presently I heard a gruff voice say:

“You have him? That is well. He is said to be a close-mouthed fool, but the cords and a few hot coals will set his tongue to clacking.”

3

With the foul-smelling sack still over my head, I was carried through several rooms, and finally put down on a hard tile floor. Then the sack was taken off, and I faced a group of stern-visaged men, dressed like the Wahabis, but evidently not of them, for of all the Arabs, the Wahabis are the most strict believers.

One of them, a huge, thick-waisted fellow with Persian features and a wiry, iron-gray beard, said:

“What have you done with the Lady Mariam? Where is she concealed? Speak quickly and truthfully, O slave of the Black Jackal, or it will be the worse for you.”

“I have done nothing with her,” I replied.

The big Persian pointed significantly toward two stout cords which depended from a rafter above my head, and to a pan of glowing charcoal near by.

“Will you speak without these?” he asked.

“She was captured by Khallaf al Tamim,” I replied, “but I know not where she is concealed.”

“We know she was captured by your Jinn-mad master,” he replied, “and you know where she was hidden. For the last time I bid you speak.”

“Khallaf is not my master,” I answered. “I was traveling with the caravan of the Lady Mariam when he captured it. Just now, I escaped from his clutches, only to be made prisoner by your men.”

“That is a lie,” he snarled. “Too often have I seen the Black Jackal’s garden *bowab* not to recognize you. We will see if the cords and coals will bring the truth to your tongue.”

Despite my protests and struggles, my shoes were removed and I was strung up by the thumbs, so that the tips of my toes barely touched the floor. I gripped the cords with my hands, thus drawing myself a few inches higher, and easing my thumbs, but one can not hold himself up thus for a long time. Just as I was beginning to tire, and would have let myself down on my toes, the Persian pushed the pan of glowing charcoal beneath them.

A moment more, and the cords were cutting deeply into my fingers, while the heat from the charcoal scorched my feet painfully. I drew them up, and the motion sunk the cords deeper into my fingers.

“Now will you speak?” asked the Persian.

“I can not tell you what you ask,” I groaned.

“You will beg to be allowed to tell me soon, O father of lies,” he replied.

Presently my fingers relaxed. Human flesh could stand no more. A searing pain told me my toes had touched the charcoal. I drew them up, but the motion increased the strain on my aching thumbs.

Just then a man entered the room. He saluted all present with the greeting of the idolaters: “*Ishtar Baraket.*” And they replied in kind. Then he seated himself beside the huge Persian, and glanced up at me. Our recognition was simultaneous, for he was the cameleer who had befriended me in the caravan, and who had evidently escaped from Khallaf as he entered the town.

“Why do you torture this man?” he asked the Persian.

“He is the gate-keeper of Khallaf,” replied that worthy, “and we would learn from him the secret of where our lady is confined.”

“Then cut him down,” said the cameleer, “for he can not tell you. He is the wounded pilgrim whom our mistress befriended.”

“You are positive?”

“By my head and beard!”

The Persian kicked the pan of charcoal from under me, and with his keen *jambiyah* severed the cords. So overcome was I with pain and exhaustion that I slumped to the floor. One of the ruffians tossed my shoes to me, and I donned them with great difficulty and pain because of my blistered feet and lacerated hands. Then, at a sign from the Persian, one of the men helped me to my feet and led me into another room.

For some time he remained there with me, and I heard the murmur of voices, so low that I could only catch a word now and then. But I gathered that they were trying to decide what to do with me. That I now knew them for members of that secret cult which all true Moslems despise, made me extremely dangerous to them. Yet there were some who feared to do away with me because I had been befriended by their mistress, and they might thus bring down her wrath on their heads.

Presently the talking grew louder—became a Babel. The evil crew seemed about evenly divided as to whether I should be kept alive, or slain.

At length, those who would have me slain won, and I heard the gruff voice of the Persian, as he ordered me strangled and buried in the garden.

When I heard this sentence, I sprang up, and dodging the man who had been sent with me, bounded through the rear door. I came out into the garden, but was pounced upon by a guard stationed there. A moment more and the man I had eluded came running out accompanied by another who had been chosen to act as my executioner.

This man, who had been ordered to strangle me, carried a thin, stout cord in his hands. While the others held me, he made the strangler’s loop and came up to cast it over my head.

Life was dear to me, and I was desperate. So as my executioner approached I kicked him in the belly and at the same time flung out my arms, throwing over the two men who held me. The wall was but a few feet away, and I reached it in an instant. Leaping up, I caught its rim with my lacerated fingers, drew myself up, and dropped to freedom on the other side.

Like a frightened hare, I scuttled off down the street, not knowing which way to run, but bent only on getting as far from that den of ruffians as possible. I had scarcely taken twenty steps, however, when I heard a great hullabaloo behind me, and loud cries of: “Stop thief! Catch the robber!”

By this time, morning had just dawned, and the call to prayer was sounding from the minaret of a near-by mosque. A few people were stirring in the street, and all of these, aroused by the cries of my pursuers, sought to detain me and joined in the chase. Soon I had a crowd of more than fifty people after me, all shouting: “Stop thief!” at the top of their voices. Stones and tiles were hurled at me from roof-tops, and snarling curs snapped at my heels. Presently a youth stuck his foot out from a doorway and tripped me. As I fell, a score of persons pounced on me.

I was dragged to my feet by the big Persian who had ordered my death a short time before, and who seemed bent on accomplishing it in public now. Two of his henchmen held my arms, while he led the cries of: “Death to the thief! Stone him!” which came from the throats of the multitude. A stone whizzed past my ear, and some one threw an overripe pomegranate with poor aim, for it missed me and struck the Persian full in the mouth.

A second stone bruised my shoulder, and a third struck my chest, knocking the breath from my body. I am positive that all would have ended for me, then and there, had not the *wali* and his watch come up at that moment.

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The *wali*, a tall, important-looking individual with a large turban and a bushy gray beard, strode into the center of the disturbance with his stout fellows knocking the rabble right and left.

“What is this brawl?” he demanded.

“We have captured a thief,” said the Persian.

“By whose testimony?”

“Mine and others.”

“Well then, take him before the *kazi*, that he may be judged according to the law. If he is found guilty he will pay the penalty soon enough without the aid of your sticks and stones.”

He signed to two of his burly fellows, who seized my arms and dragged me away.

The *kazi*, a short, pot-bellied Wahabi, whose round and rubicund countenance showed the effect of much good living with little endeavor, stared at me for a moment and said:

“Of what is this man accused? And who will bear witness against him?”

“I bear witness,” said the Persian. “He is a thief.”

I had it on the point of my tongue to denounce the Persian and his companions as idolaters, and thus not only win the sympathy of the crowd, but compass the destruction of my enemies. Then I suddenly remembered that these fellows, no matter what they had done to me, were the followers of Mariam engaged in an attempt to rescue her from the clutches of Khallaf. It followed that to denounce them would be to lessen if not absolutely to cut off her hope of rescue. I resolved, therefore, that no matter what happened, the identity of these men would not be revealed by me.

“You say this man is a thief,” said the *kazi*, addressing the Persian. “What has he stolen?”

“Why, just now he stole my head-cloth and burnoose from my house, and escaped over my garden wall.”

“You lie, swine of Iran!” I retorted. “A Persian pig never wore clothing such as this.”

“I have worn them for a year, O stench!” he said.

“You saw them for the first time today, O offal!” I answered.

“May your falsehoods return and throttle you, O liar!”

“May your beard turn to a nest of maggots and devour your lying tongue!”

“Enough of this abuse!” said the *kazi*, sternly. “You, Persian, say that this *Badawi* stole your headcloth and burnoose. Have you recovered them?”

“No, O fount of wisdom. He still wears them.”

“But how am I to know that he wears your headcloth and cloak?”

“I testify that they are the property of Maksoud, the Persian,” cried one of the men who had captured me.

“And I,” cried the other, “also certify that they are Maksoud’s property.”

“The Sunni law,” said the *kazi*, thoughtfully stroking his beard, “ordains that for an offense of this kind, a man must part with his right hand. Take the prisoner, therefore, and strike off his right hand, seeing that the wound be properly seared so he will not bleed to death.”

“We hear and obey, O paragon of understanding,” replied the two burly ruffians who held me, and were about to hurry me away to carry out the sentence when there was a clatter of hoofs and a company of horsemen rode up. At their head was Khallaf the *Jabarti*.

“Way for Khallaf the Strong!” cried the people. “Way for the blood-brother of our lord, the Sharif!”

“What is this, *kazi*?” asked Khallaf, reining his Awasil mare to a sliding halt. “Where got you this man?”

“Just now he was brought to me, accused of thievery, excellency,” replied the *kazi*, “and I have sentenced him to pay the penalty according to the Sunni law.”

“The fellow is an escaped slave of mine,” said Khallaf. “Turn him over to me, and I will be responsible for him, and for his ample punishment.”

“I hear and I obey, O protector of the poor and blood-brother of our Sharif,” replied the *kazi*, respectfully.

Two of Khallaf’s men quickly dismounted, and after binding my hands behind me, threw me over a saddle-bow.

The Abyssinian was about to ride away when he suddenly spied in the crowd the cameleer who had befriended me on the march, and who had later identified me to the followers of Mariam.

“Seize me that man!” roared Khallaf, and it was no sooner said than done. The cameleer was bound and thrown over a saddle-bow, and the cavalcade moved away.

4

Back at the house of Khallaf, I was thrown into the selfsame cell from which I had escaped the night before. But this time, the *Jabarti* took no chances. In addition to the old hook-nosed Wahabi who patrolled the corridor, a burly guard stood, naked simitar in hand, in front of my cell door.

I asked for food and drink, and was given a crust of stale bread and a cup of water.

Several hours later I was led from my cell, each arm held by a powerful warrior, and taken into a magnificently furnished room—the *salamlík* or reception room of the Abyssinian. He was seated on a luxuriously cushioned *diwan*, smoking a *shisha*, while one lissom slave girl fanned him with a palm leaf and another proffered sherbet and coffee on a golden tray.

“Bind the dog to the pillar at my right,” directed Khallaf.

I was hurried forward, and my hands were drawn back as far as they would reach around the thick pillar, and made fast with a cord.

A moment later the cameleer was brought in. At the order of the *Jabarti* he was similarly bound to the pillar at the left of the *diwan*.

Khallaf took a sip of sherbet from a tiny golden cup.

“Away, all of you,” he said, “and send Suwayd to me.”

The four warriors and two slave girls departed, and shortly thereafter the huge black eunuch entered, carrying a brazier in which charcoal smoldered, and a small pair of bellows. A long simitar hung at his side, and two curved *jambiyahs* were stuck in his sash. On his ebony features was a look of such pleased anticipation that I knew he was about to commit some act of fiendish cruelty.

“Heat the pincers, my faithful servant,” directed the *Jabarti*, “and while they are heating, slit the throat of this cameleer. He must be gotten out of the way quickly, as we have other important business at hand.”

“Harkening and obedience, excellency,” said the huge Nubian with a broad grin.

He put the brazier on the floor and began blowing the charcoal with the bellows. Projecting from the coals were the long handles of a pair of pincers.

When he had the coals glowing brightly, the eunuch put down his bellows, and rising, walked toward the cowering cameleer. Deliberately he drew a *jambiyah* from his sash, and tested the keenness of its edge with his thumb, while the poor fellow alternately wept and pleaded for his life.

Suddenly he stepped up to the doomed man, and seizing his beard with his left hand, tilted his head back, exposing his throat. The unfortunate wretch uttered a gurgling shriek as the keen blade was drawn across his gullet.

The big Nubian stood there for a moment unconcernedly; then he released his grip on the beard, permitting the lifeless head to fall forward.

“A good stroke, Suwayd,” said Khallaf. “Now make ready to deal with the other.”

The eunuch once more bent beside his brazier, and blew the charcoal up to a blaze with the bellows.

Then the Abyssinian clapped his hands, and a shapely young girl, swathed in diaphanous *harim* garments, was led in by a black female.

“Welcome, Mariam Khatun,” said Khallaf. “I have at last captured the young *Badawi* in whose welfare you are so deeply interested. You will be seated here at my feet, that you may witness what occurs to those who oppose my will.”

“I sit at your feet? I?” retorted the girl. “To sit at the feet of a baboon would be preferable. I will stand.”

So saying, she wrenched her wrist from the grasp of the black female, who was attempting to drag her before the *diwan*, and dealt her a buffet across her ear that sent her sprawling.

“Let be, Lenah,” said Khallaf laughingly to the black girl, “and depart.”

Scrambling to her feet, the negress salaamed to her master, and hastily left the room.

“And you, little tigress,” said Khallaf, “may stand if you wish, as you can see what happens to this presumptuous *Badawi* standing as well as sitting. First, his tongue, which has named me a mongrel dog, will be torn out by the roots with hot pincers. Then his eyes, which have dared to aspire to the woman of Khallaf the Strong, will be gouged out with the red-hot blade of a *jambiyah*. After which, when a sufficient time has elapsed for him to appreciate the full enormity of his misdeeds, his throat will be cut, even as that of yonder cowardly cameleer.”

“Is there no help for it, but that you perpetrate this foul injustice?” she asked. “That you torture and murder an innocent man?”

“Why, as to that, it lies within your province to say,” replied the crafty Khallaf.

“My province?”

“None other. Remember that Khallaf the Strong is your love-slave. Requite his love, and your lightest wish will be his law.”

The eyes of Mariam flashed fire above her white *yashmak*.

“As to that, O great black gorilla,” she said, “I should prefer to share his torture and death.”

“Perhaps you will change your mind after you have witnessed his agonies,” said Khallaf. “Proceed, Suwayd.”

The big Nubian, who had been industriously plying his bellows during this conversation, now pulled the pincers from the brazier. Their jaws glowed white-hot as he advanced toward me with a look of fiendish delight.

Seizing the point of my jaw with his left hand, he pushed it down. I moved my head with it, keeping my mouth tightly closed, whereupon he held the hot pincers beneath the end of my

nose, causing me to jerk my head back. My mouth flew open, and he inserted the pincers between my teeth, holding them apart, and searing my lips and tongue.

“Now, my loud-talking youth,” he said, “we’ll have your tongue in a moment.”

He was peering into my mouth and spreading the jaws of the pincers when, like the very tigress Khallaf had named her, Mariam bounded to my rescue. In her hand was a slender dagger she had snatched from her bosom. It rose and fell, buried to the hilt in the breast of Suwayd, who with a loud shriek and a look of horror on his face, slumped to the floor, the pincers clattering from his hand.

Whipping out his simitar, the Abyssinian leaped to his feet just as Mariam cut the rope that held my arms around the pillar.

The hilt of Suwayd’s simitar projected from beneath his huge carcass. I seized it, and came on guard as Khallaf descended on me, a thundercloud of wrath and a demon of destruction.

Sparks flew from our clashing blades as we cut and parried, and although my antagonist was larger and stronger than I, these odds were somewhat evened by my superior skill and greater agility.

There came the sound of running and shouting from beyond the door, but in a flash Mariam had reached it and drawn the bar.

Fierce anger flared in Khallaf’s eyes when he found himself unable to instantly reach me with his blade. Accustomed to cutting down men of less skill by his hammer-and-tongs methods, backed by his enormous strength, he was both astounded and annoyed by my ability to elude his terrific rain of blows, and to return them in such good measure that he was constrained to spend as much time in parrying as in cutting.

For my part, I knew that we were evenly matched for the moment, but because of my wounds and privations, his greater strength and freshness must prevail in the end.

I was reaching the limit of my endurance, when Fortune suddenly interposed in my favor, for Khallaf stepped squarely into the brazier of smoldering charcoal in which Suwayd had heated the pincers. It must have burned instantly through his paper-thin *harim* slippers, as he uttered a howl of pain, and for an instant, lowered his guard.

In that instant, I smote his neck with all my remaining strength. Allah guided and aided my arm, for his scowling black head flew off and rolled away, while his immense body pitched to the floor.

But scarcely had I rid myself of this enemy, ere the door was broken down, and a company of armed men poured in. At their head was Maksoud, the Persian, who leveled a pistol at my head and pulled the trigger.

5

Simultaneously with the report of Maksoud’s pistol, there was the click of steel beneath its barrel. Mariam, seeing his purpose, had struck it upward with her bloody dagger.

“Fool!” she said. “Another move to harm this youth who is under my protection, and I’ll have you laid by the heels and beaten to death with the *kurba*.”

“I crave forgiveness, O Voice of the Great Goddess,” said Maksoud, contritely. “This *Badawi* is the possessor of dangerous knowledge, and being a Moslem, might divulge it.”

“As to that, I will assume all responsibility,” replied the girl. “What of this black baboon’s household?”

“The men are dead, my lady,” said Maksoud. “The women and children are imprisoned in the *harim*.”

“Lock them in the dungeons with food and water for two days,” she ordered, “all except the black slave girl, Lenah. Then strip the house, and make ready for the journey.”

“Harkening and obedience, O Oracle of Ishtar,” replied Maksoud, and departed with his men to carry out her commands.

In an unbelievably short space of time these sons of idolatry had stripped the house of its valuables, the rich loot of Khallaf’s many raids, and had made a caravan ready for departure.

Maksoud, with his face blackened and all but hidden by his *kufiyah* or head handkerchief, which he had drawn across his countenance in the manner of the *lisam*, wore a suit of Khallaf’s magnificent apparel and rode his milk-white she-dromedary, thus readily passing for the Abyssinian, for they were of about the same build.

A big negro named Mustafa, who was among the followers of Mariam, wore the clothing and took the part of Suwayd the eunuch, who always accompanied his master on his journeys.

Mariam rode in a litter. Lenah the black slave girl rode in another, bound and gagged. Those of Mariam’s followers who had been inhabitants of Hail, but who were now leaving it forever, made up the balance of the caravan.

Wearing *Badawin* garb, I rode the Awasil mare of Khallaf beside the lady’s litter.

We had completed a day’s journey, rested, and were preparing to resume the second, when Mariam called for Musayn, the *‘alim*.

The graybeard came with pen, ink-case and paper, and she bade him write a note as follows:

“To Sharif Nureddin Yusuf:

Greeting!

And after, know that this, the slave girl of Khallaf the Black Jackal has been sent to you on an errand of mercy and warning. Mercy, that you release the *harim* of the *Jabarti*, whom I do not hold responsible for his crimes, and who are locked in his dungeons. Warning, that you gaze on the earthly remains of the villainous Abyssinian and his ruffians, and meditate on the fate of those who attempt to take by force a Virgin of the All-Powerful Mother Goddess.

Attempt to follow and you will be as Khallaf. Be warned, and I prophesy that you will attain

The Peace,  
MARIAM KHATUN.”

Just as our caravan departed, the slave girl was dispatched in the opposite direction with the note, riding a dromedary and carrying a day’s provisions.

We traveled a five-day journey across the desert after that, until we came to a wady where I was compelled to dismount, and ride in a litter blindfolded with Mustafa watching me.

At the end of the seventh day, my blindfold was removed as we entered a pleasant village situated in a grove of palm trees which was watered by a stream that trickled through a narrow valley. The houses were small, but in the center of the village there rose a great temple of the finest white marble, with pillared porticos and a dome of polished brass.

During the entire journey I had caught but fleeting glimpses of the Lady Mariam, always veiled and muffled in her traveling-clothes. But now she drew the curtain of her litter and summoned Maksoud.



“You will house this young *Badawi* in my dwelling,” she directed, “while I repair to the temple to give thanks to our Great Mother Goddess for my deliverance. On your life, see that he is treated with honor and respect.”

So saying, she closed the curtain of her litter and rode on, while Maksoud, who seemed little pleased with his commission, led me to a small but neat house near the temple. Here the Persian and I were ushered into the *salamlik* by an old and wrinkled eunuch who was a hunchbacked dwarf. When my conductor had made known to him the wishes of his mistress, he clapped his hands, summoning slaves, male and female, who brought us fruits, sherbets, coffee and pipes.

Presently there came to the house a messenger who spoke to the eunuch in a language I did not understand. Upon hearing his words, Maksoud excused himself and left.

I judged that the conversation had alluded to me, as both messenger and eunuch had glanced at me from time to time.

As soon as the messenger left, the eunuch clapped his hands once more, and two Mamelukes entered. To these, he gave instructions in the same strange tongue, and they hurried away.

Presently one of the Mamelukes returned, and bowing low to me, said:

“The bath is prepared, *saidi*.”

“You will be pleased to accompany this slave, my lord,” said the eunuch, “that you may be prepared for the test.”

“The test?” I asked, bewildered. “What test?”

“All will be revealed to you in good time,” said the hunchback, mysteriously.

Puzzled, I arose, and followed the Mameluke through a corridor into a room of marble and carnelian, where a hot bath had been prepared. The steam that arose from the water carried the scent of the rarest and most luxurious of perfumes.

The Mamelukes proved to be skilled bath attendants and masseurs, who scrubbed me with hot water and cold until my skin glowed with the roseate tint of a summer sunset, after which they anointed me with sweet-smelling unguents and cosmetics. Then, while the one tendered me sherbets and broths, the other dressed me in handsome and costly garments that would have done honor to an emir.

I then returned to the *salamlik*, where seven graybeards, attired in long black robes, and wearing black turbans, the fronts of which were adorned with crescent moons—symbols of Ishtar cut from mother-of-pearl—awaited me.

Then, conducted by the hunchbacked dwarf, who had in the meantime decked out his twisted body in festal array, and followed by the seven graybeards in solemn procession, I went out into the street.

From the temple, the tones of an immense gong resounded through the village in measured, throbbing cadence. Then there poured forth from the houses, and from the shops in the *souk*, men, women and children, all of whom marched to the temple, in step with the strokes of the gong.

The hunchbacked eunuch fell in step, I with him, and the graybeards who followed us did likewise.

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When we arrived at the temple we avoided the main entrance, into which the village populace was pouring, and went in by a side door. Here a hoodwink was securely fastened over my eyes. Having been warned not to touch it no matter what might occur, nor to speak

unless spoken to, I was led away by two unseen conductors who held my arms on the right and left.

They took me down a stairway into what smelled like a musty subterranean animal den. Here my conductors brought me to a halt, and I distinctly heard the approaching pads of a large beast coming stealthily toward me. It stopped just in front of me and sniffed. Its fetid breath fanned my face. Then it began to make low, moaning noises, and I heard the rattle of steel.

Suddenly the hoodwink was jerked from my eyes. Standing just in front of me was a huge, black-maned African lion, rattling the bars of its cage as it endeavored to reach me with its huge paws.

My two conductors were of the black-robed fraternity, but wore, in addition, black masks that concealed all features but their eyes.

One of them spoke in solemn, sepulchral tones:

“Before you, O youth, is a dangerous path. It may lead you to love or to death. Only the great Mother Goddess knows. You are desired by the Oracle of Ishtar for the one night of love which is vouchsafed all her handmaidens by our goddess. But the final choice rests with Ishtar alone. If she accepts you, then will you consummate this love, but if she rejects you, you will die beneath the claws of this fierce beast, and its belly will be your tomb.

“You may turn back now, and escape, unhindered and unharmed, for it is written that those who come to the ordeal must do so willingly. Or you may go on, and stake your life on the issue. Consider the matter, therefore, and name your choice.”

I looked at the great beast, sheathing and unsheathing its sickle claws through the bars and licking its slavering jowls in anticipation of the pleasure of rending my flesh and drinking my blood. Then I thought of the lovely Mariam, and knew that, rather than lose this lovely creature, witch and idolatress though she was, I stood ready to die not one, but a thousand deaths.

“I am ready for the ordeal,” I said.

The hoodwink was drawn over my eyes once more and I was taken up the stairway into a room filled with a thousand faint rustlings and whisperings, as if it contained an immense audience who waited tensely in awe-stricken silence for something to happen. The air was heavy with the odors of sweet incense, in which I, who had been an attar, detected the sandalwood of Hind and the musk of Cathay.

Here I was helped to mount three large steps, and caused to kneel, after which my hoodwink was removed.

I was in the huge auditorium of the temple, kneeling on a wide semicircular dais that faced an immense statue of Ishtar, wrought from white marble. Save for the feeble light cast by seven candles that flickered in front of the statue, the entire room was in darkness. Just in front of the candles, seven pots of incense smoldered. Behind me, and on each side, I could hear the faint rustling and whispering which is characteristic of a large crowd tensely awaiting some unusual event.

Suddenly there sounded the low wailing of a hautboy in minor melody. It increased in volume, and was accompanied by the jingling of sistrums and the booming of kettledrums. Between the dais on which I knelt and the altar that stood before the image of the goddess, another larger dais was rising from the floor. Like the one I occupied, it was shaped like a half-moon. On this dais were seven girls, robed in flowing, translucent white garments. The

one in the center stood with bowed head, arms crossed on breasts, while the three on each side of her jingled sistrums and danced a slow dance of many postures.

In front of each girl, a candle burned and a small pot of incense smoldered. As the platform came up above the level of my own, it stopped, and my heart gave a sudden bound as I recognized Mariam as the central figure of the group.

When the platform stopped, the music ceased and the girls posed as rigidly as if they had been statues. Then I heard a rustling sound behind me, and six men came up out of the darkness, three taking places on the dais on each side of me. I noticed by the candle-light from the other platform that all were dressed exactly as was I.

As soon as they took their places, Mariam turned and faced the image of the goddess. Bowing low, while the three girls on each side knelt, facing her, she said:

“Great Mother Ishtar, I have caused to be brought to thy temple the man of my heart, whom I have chosen for the night of love which thou vouchsafest all thy handmaidens. He hath signified his willingness to forfeit his life if he displeases thee, and now awaits thy pleasure and thy decision. I beseech thee, O Mother Goddess, that thou wilt grant him his life, which out of his love for me he hath placed in the balance, and thus permit thy handmaiden and thy oracle her heart’s desire.”

Having finished her petition, Mariam prostrated herself before the idol, and the six dancing girls did likewise.

Then there sounded from behind the immense statue, the whirl of many wings, and a flock of white doves flew out above the two platforms. Once, twice, thrice, they circled. Then they slowly descended, hovering above my head and those of the six men who were on the dais with me. Presently one alighted on my shoulder. It was followed by another and another, until the entire flock of white doves had either perched on my body or alighted near me, to strut about, puffing and cooing.

Mariam did not look toward me, but somehow seemed to know just what had occurred, for she arose, and spoke once more to the image:

“Great Mother Ishtar, I thank thee.”

Lights suddenly flashed on in the temple, and a great cry went up from the multitude:

“Ishtar has spoken! All glory to Ishtar!”

Mariam and I were placed side by side on a huge litter, and borne at the head of a procession to her house. Here a great feast was spread, and for several hours we acted as host and hostess. Then the guests took their leave, and we were alone.

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Of that night of love, *effendi*, my voice will ever remain silent, though my heart will always sing. It passed so swiftly that it seemed to last for but a moment, yet in it was consummated the sum of a lifetime of desire. My last memory was that, when morning dawned, I fell asleep, my head pillowed on the snowy breast of my beloved.

When I wakened, I was riding in a *shugduf* litter on the back of a camel. My head ached as if I had partaken too freely of *bhag*. Looking out, I beheld, riding ahead of me, Maksoud the Persian.

I shouted and he turned. Then he rode back and handed me the lead-rope of my camel.

“Just ahead of you,” he said, “is El Ghor, and beyond that, the Jericho road to Jerusalem. The pack camel that follows you carries all the valuables of which you were robbed, for it was Khallaf the Strong who robbed you. It carries, in addition, precious stones and gold equivalent in value to half the loot taken from the Abyssinian, for it was you who slew him. Say nothing

to your Moslem brethren of what has occurred to you, and so will you attain health, wealth, and the peace. *Ishtar Baraket.*”

And so, *effendi*, there passed out of my life, Mariam, a pearl of great price, a jewel among a million. And though Allah might vouchsafe me a thousand lifetimes, I could never forget her—never cease to love her.

Ho, Silat! Bring the sweet and take the full.

In the sight of Allah, who knows not death, slaying is no great matter; but it is a great matter in the sight of men, who behold death as the end of life.

—*Kasida of El Guri.*

[The end of *The Dragoman's Secret* by Otis Adelbert Kline]