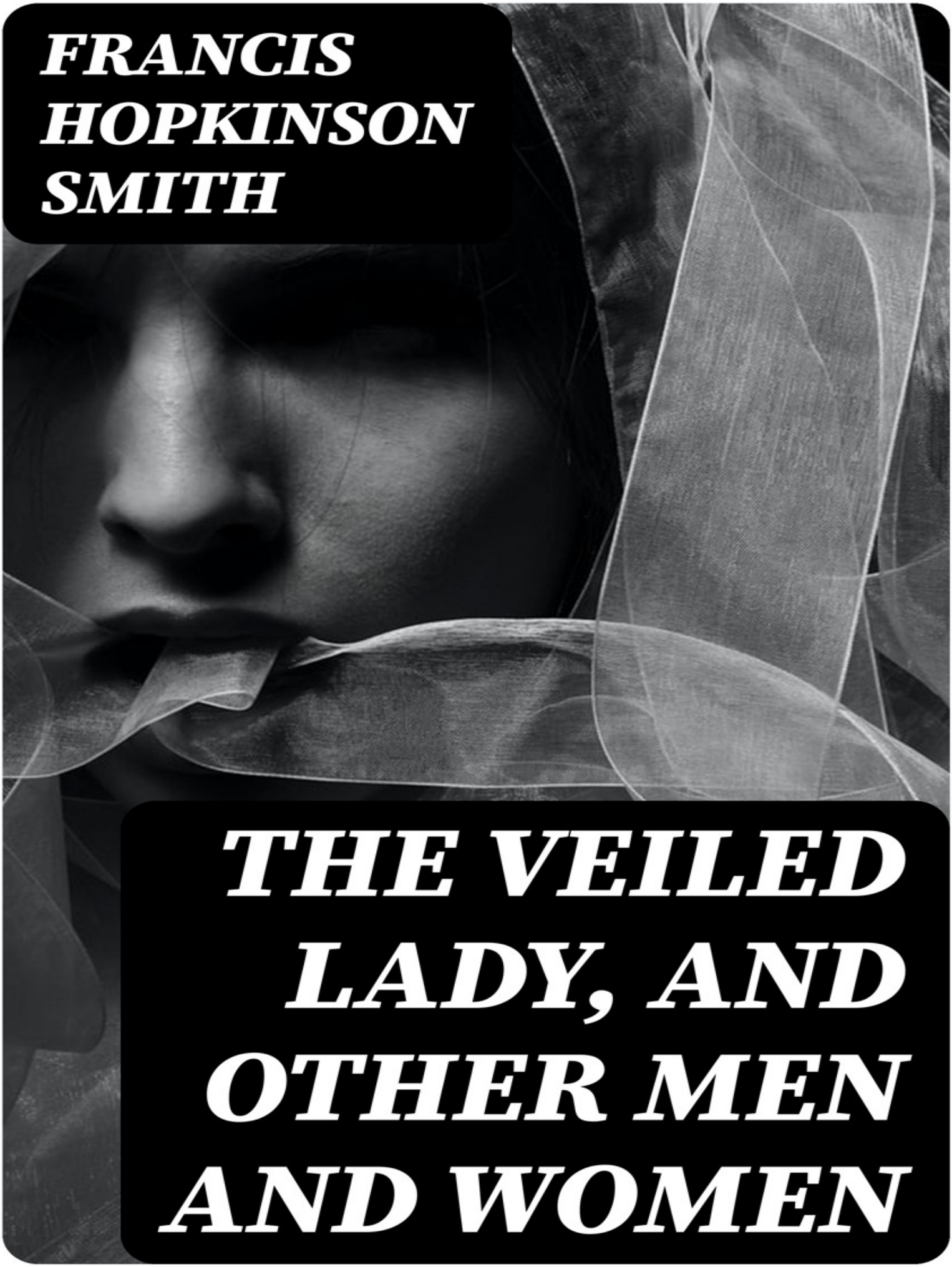
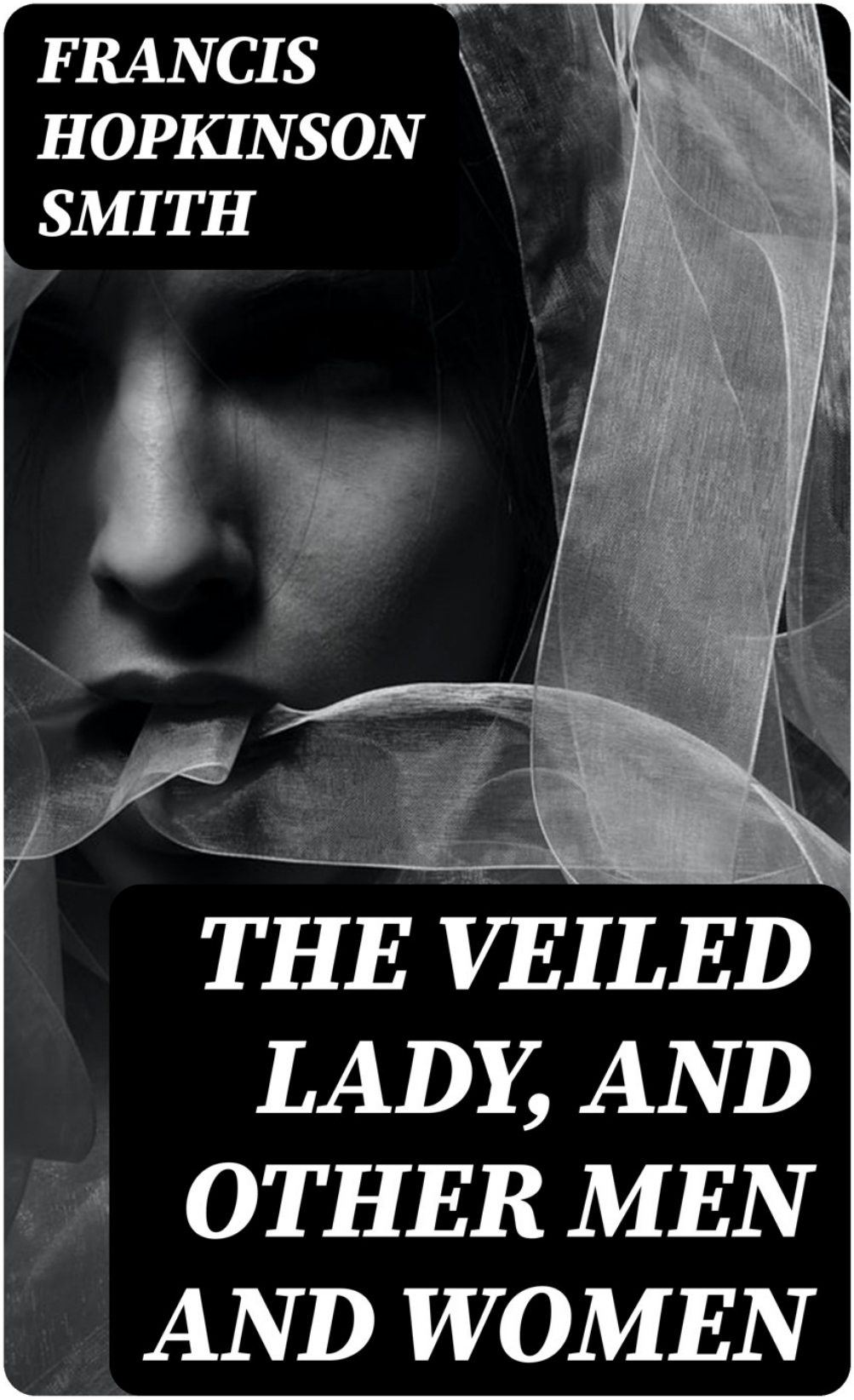


FRANCIS HOPKINSON SMITH

THE VEILED LADY, AND OTHER MEN AND WOMEN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The Veiled Lady, and Other Men and Women

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THE VEILED LADY OF STAMBOUL

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Joe Hornstog told me this story—the first part of it; the last part of it came to me in a way which proves how small the world is.

Joe belongs to that conglomerate mass of heterogeneous nationalities found around the Golden Horn, whose ancestry is as difficult to trace as a gypsy's. He says he is a "Jew gentleman from Germany," but he can't prove it, and he knows he can't.

There is no question about his being part Jew, and there is a strong probability of his being part German, and, strange to say, there is not the slightest doubt of his being part gentleman—in his own estimation; and I must say in mine, when I look back over an acquaintance covering many years and remember how completely my bank account was at his disposal and how little of its contents he appropriated.

And yet, were I required to hold up my hand in open court, I would have to affirm that Joe, whatever his other strains might be, was, after all, ninety-nine per cent. Levantine—which is another way of saying that he is part of every nationality about him.

As to his honesty and loyalty, is he not the chosen dragoman of kings and princes when they journey into far distant lands (he speaks seven languages and many tribal dialects), and is he not today wearing in his buttonhole the ribbon of the order of the Mejidieh, bestowed upon him by

his Imperial Highness the Sultan, in reward for his ability and faithfulness?

I must admit that I myself have been his debtor—not once, but many times. It was this same quick-sighted, quick-witted Levantine who lifted me from my sketching stool and stood me on my feet in the plaza of the Hippodrome one morning just in time to prevent my being trodden under foot by six Turks carrying the body of their friend to the cemetery—in time, too, to save me from the unforgivable sin among Orientals, of want of reverence for their dead. I had heard the tramp of the pall-bearers, and supposing it to be that of the Turkish patrol, had kept at work. They were prowling everywhere, day and night, and during those days they passed every ten minutes—nine soldiers in charge of an officer of police—all owing to the fact that some five thousand Armenians, anxious to establish a new form of government, had been wiped out of existence only the week before.

Once on my feet (Joe accomplished his purpose with the help of my suspenders) and the situation clear, I had sense enough left to uncover my head and stand in an attitude of profound reverence until the procession had passed. I can see them now—the coffin wrapped in a camel's-hair shawl, the dead man's fez and turban resting on top. Then I replaced my hat and finished the last of the six minarets of the mosque gleaming like opals in the soft light of the morning.

This act of courtesy, due so little to my own initiative, and so largely to Joe's, gained for me many friends in and about the mosque—not only those of the dead man, one of whom rowed a caique, but among the priests who formed the funeral cortege—a fact unknown to me until Joe imparted it. "Turk-man say you good man, effendi," was the

way he put it. "You stoop over yourselluf humble for their dead."

On another occasion Joe again stood by my side when, with hat off and with body in a half kotow, I sat before the Pasha, who was acting chief of police after that stormy Armenian week—it was over really in five days.

"Most High Potentate," Joe began, translating my plain Anglo-Saxon "Please, sir," into Eastern hyperbolics, "I again seek your Excellency's presence to make my obeisance and to crave your permission to transfer to cheap paper some of the glories of this City of Turquoise and Ivory. This, if your Highness will deign to remember, is not the first time I have trespassed. Twice before have I prostrated myself, and twice has your Sublimity granted my request."

"These be troublous times," puffed his Swarthiness through his mustache, his tobacco-stained fingers meanwhile rolling a cigarette; a dark-skinned, heavily-bearded Oriental, this Pasha, with an eye that burned holes in you. "You should await a more peaceful season, effendi, for your art."

"On account of the Armenians, your Excellency?" I ventured to inquire with a smile.

"Yes." This, in translation by Joe, came with a whistling sound, like the escaping steam of a radiator.

"But why should I fear these disturbers of the peace, your Supreme Highness? The Turk is my friend, and has been for years. They know me and my pure and unblemished life. They also know by this time that I have been one of the chosen few among nations who have enjoyed your Highness's confidence, and to whom you have given protection." Here my spine took the form of a

horseshoe curve—Moorish pattern. "As to these dogs of Armenians" (this last was Joe's, given with a growl to show his deep detestation of the race—part of his own, if he would but acknowledge it), "your Excellency will look out for them." He WAS looking out for them at the rate of one hundred a day and no questions asked or answered so far as the poor fellows were concerned.

At this the distinguished Oriental finished rolling his cigarette, looked at me blandly—it is astonishing how sweet a smile can overspread the face of a Turk when he is granting you a favor or signing the death warrant of an infidel—clapped his hands, summoning an attendant who came in on all fours, and whispered an order in the left ear of the almost prostrate man. This done, the Pasha rose from his seat, straightened his shoulders (no handsomer men the world over than these high-class Turks), shook my hand warmly, gave me the Turkish salute—heart, mouth, and forehead touched with the tips of flying fingers—and bowed me out.

Once through the flat leather curtain that hid the exit door of the Pasha's office, and into the bare corridor, I led Joe to a corner out of the hearing of the ever-present spy, and, nailing him to the wall, propounded this query:

"What did the High-Pan-Jam say, Joe?"

Hornstog raised his shoulders level with his ears, fanned out his fingers, crooked his elbows, and in his best conglomerate answered:

"He say, effendi, that a guard of ein men, Yusuf, his name—I know him—he is in the Secret Service—oh, we will have no trouble with him—" Here Joe chafed his thumb and forefinger with the movement of a paying teller counting a

roll. "He come every morning to Galata Bridge for you me. He say, too, if any trouble while you paint I go him—ah, effendi, it is only Joe Hornstog can do these things. The Pasha, he know me—all good Turk-men know me. Where we paint now, subito? In the plaza, or in the patio of the Valedee, like last year?"

"Neither. We go first to the Mosque of Suleiman. I want the view through the gate of the court-yard, with the mosque in the background. Best place is below the cafe. Pick up those traps and come along."

Thus it was that on this particular summer afternoon Joe and I found ourselves on the shadow side of a wall up a crooked, break-neck street paved with rocks, each as big as a dress-suit case, from which I got a full view of the wonderful mosque tossing its splendors into the still air, its cresting of minarets so much frozen spray against the blue.

The little comedy—or shall I say tragedy?—began a few minutes after I had opened my easel—I sitting crouched in the shadow, my elbow touching the plastered wall. Only Joe and I were present. Yusuf, the guard, a skinny, half-fed Turk in fez and European dress, had as usual betaken himself to the cafe fronting the same sidewalk on which I sat, but half a block away; far enough to be out of hearing, but near enough to miss my presence should I decamp suddenly without notifying him. There he drank some fifty cups of coffee, each one the size of a thimble, and smoked as many cigarettes, their burned stubs locating his seat under the cafe awning as clearly as peanut-shells mark a boy's at the circus. I, of course, paid for both.

So absorbed was I in my work—the mosque never was so beautiful as on that day—I gave no thought to the fact that in my eagerness to hide my canvas from the prying sun I

had really backed myself into a small wooden gate, its lintel level with the sidewalk—a dry, dusty, sun-blistered gate, without lock or hasp on the outside, and evidently long closed. Even then I would not have noticed it, had not my ears caught the sound of a voice—two voices, in fact—low, gurgling voices—as if a fountain had just been turned on, spattering the leaves about it. Then my eye lighted, not only on the gate, but upon a seam or split in the wood, half-way up its height, showing where a panel was sometimes pushed back, perhaps for surer identification, before the inside wooden beam would be loosened.

So potent was the spell of the mosque's witchery that the next instant I should have forgotten both door and panel had not Joe touched the toe of my boot with his own—he was sitting close to me—and in explanation lifted his eyebrow a hair's breadth, his eyes fixed on the slowly sliding panel—sliding noiselessly, an inch at a time. Only then did my mind act.

What I saw was first a glow of yellow green, then a mass of blossoms, then a throat, chin and face, one after another, all veiled in a gossamer thin as a spider's web, and last—and these I shall never forget—a pair of eyes shining clear below and above the veil, and which gazed into mine with the same steady, full, unfrightened look one sometimes sees on the face of a summer moon when it bursts through a rift in the clouds.

"Don't move and don't look," whispered Joe in my ear, a tone in his voice of one who had just seen a ghost. "Allah! Ekber! Yuleima!"

"Who is she?" I answered, craning my neck to see the closer.

"No speak now—keep still," he mumbled under his breath.

It may have been the gossamer veil shading a rose skin, making pink pearls of the cheeks and chin and lending its charm to the other features; or it may have been the wonderful eyes that made me oblivious of Joe's warning, for I did look—looked with all my eyes, and kept on looking.

Men have died for just such eyes. Even now, staid old painter as I am, the very remembrance of their wondrous size—big as a young doe's and as pleading, their lids fringed by long feathery lashes that opened and shut with the movement of a tired butterfly—sends little thrills of delight scampering up and down my spine. Bulbuls, timid gazelles, perfumed narghilehs, anklets of beaten gold strung with turquoise, tinkling cymbals, tiny turned-up slippers with silk tassels on their toes—everything that told of the intoxicating life of the East were mirrored in their unfathomed depths.

Most of these qualities, I am aware, are found in many another pair of lambent, dreamy eyes half-hidden by the soft folds of a yashmak—eyes which these houris often flash on some poor devil of a giaour, knowing how safe they are and how slim his chance for further acquaintance. Strange tales are told of their seductive power and strange disappearances take place because of them. And yet I saw at a glance that there was nothing of all this in her wondering gaze. Her eyes, in fact, were fixed neither on Joseph nor on me, nor did they linger for one instant on the beautiful mosque. It was my canvas that held their gaze. Men and mosques were old stories; pictures of either as astounding as a glimpse into heaven.

Again Joe bent his head and whispered to me, his glance this time on the mosque, on the hill, on the cafe, where Yusuf sat sipping his coffee, talking to me all the time out of the corner of his mouth.

"Remember, effendi, if Yusuf come we go way chabouk. You look at your picture all time—paint—no look at her. If Yusuf come and catch us it make trouble for her—make trouble for you—make more trouble for me. Police Pasha don't know she come to this garden—I think somebody must help her. You better stop now and go cafe. I find Yusuf. I no like this place."

With this Hornstog rose to his feet and began packing the trap, still whispering, his eyes on the ground. Never once did he look in the direction of the houri peering through the sliding panel.

The clatter of a horse's hoofs now resounded through the still air. A mounted officer was approaching. Joe looked up, turned a light pea-green, backed his body into the gate with the movement of an eel, put his cheek close to the sliding panel, and whispered some words in Turkish. The girl leaned a little forward, glanced at the officer as if in confirmation of Joseph's warning, and smothering a low cry, sprang back from the opening. The next instant my eye caught the thumb and forefinger of a black hand noiselessly closing the panel. Joe straightened up, pulled himself into the position of a sentinel on guard, saluted the officer, who passed without looking to the right or left, drew a handkerchief from his pocket, and began mopping his head.

"What the devil is it all about, Joe? Why, you look as if you had had the wind knocked out of you."

"Oh, awful close, awful close! I tell you—but not here. Come, we go 'way—we go now—not stay here any more. If that officer see the lady with us the Pasha send me to black mosque for five year and you find yourself board ship on way to Tripoli. Here come Yusuf—damn him! You tell him you no like view of mosque from here—say you find another place to-morrow—you do this quick. Hornstog never lie."

On my way across the Galata Bridge to my quarters in Pera that same afternoon Joe followed until Yusuf had made his kotow and we had made ours, the three ending in a triple flight of fingers—waited until the guard was well on his way back to the Pasha's office—it was but a short way from the Stamboul end of the Galata—and drawing me into one of the small cafes overlooking the waters of the Golden Horn, seated me at the far end near a window where we could talk without being overheard. Here Joe ordered coffee and laid a package of cigarettes on the table.

"My! but that was like the razor at the throat—not for all the hairs on my head would I had her look out the small hole in the door when Serim come along. Somebody must be take care of you, you Joe Hornstog, that you don't make damn big fool of yourselluf. Ha! but it make me creep like a spider crawl."

I had pulled up a chair by this time and was facing him.

"Now what is it? Who is the girl? Who was the chap on horseback?"

"That man on the horse is Serim Pasha, chief of the palace police. He has eyes around twice; one in the forehead, one in each ear, one in the behind of his head. He did not see her—if he did—well, we would not be talk now together—sure not after to-morrow night."

"But what has he got to do with it? What did you say her name was? Yuleima?"

"Yes, Yuleima. What has Serim to do with her? Well, I tell you. If she get away off go Serim's head. Listen! I speak something you never hear anywhere 'cept in Turk-man's land. I know it all—everything. I know her prince—he knows me. I meet him Damascus once—he told me some things then—the tears run his cheeks down like a baby's when he talk—and Serim know I know somethings! Ah! that's why he not believe me if he catch me talk to her. Afterward I find more out from my friend in Yuleima's house—he is the gardener. Put your head close, effendi."

I drew my chair nearer and listened.

"Yuleima," began Joe, "is one womans like no other womans in all—"

But I shall not attempt the dragoman's halting, broken jargon interspersed with Italian and German words—it will grate on you as it grated on me. I will assume for the moment—and Joe would be most thankful to have me do so—that the learned Hornstog, the friend of kings and princes, is as fluent in English as he is in Turkish, Arabic, and Greek.

It all began in a caique—or rather in two caiques. One was on its way to a little white house that nestles among the firs at the foot of the bare brown hill overlooking the village of Beicos. The other was bound for the Fountain Beautiful, where the women and their slaves take the air in the soft summer mornings.

In the first caique, rowed by two caique-jis gorgeously dressed in fluffy trousers and blouses embroidered in gold, sat the daughter of the rich Bagdad merchant.

In the second caique, cigarette in hand, lounged the nephew of the Khedive, Mahmoud Bey; scarce twenty, slight, oval face with full lips, hair black as sealskin and as soft, and eyes that smouldered under heavy lids. Four rowers in blue and silver attended his Highness, the amber-colored boat skimming the waters as a tropical bird skims a lagoon.

The two had passed each other the week before on the day of the Selamlik (the Turkish holiday) while paddling up the Sweet Waters of Asia—a little brook running into the Bosphorus and deep enough for caiques to float, and every day since that blissful moment my lady had spent the morning under the wide-spreading plane-trees shading the Fountain Beautiful—the Chesmegazell—attended by her faithful slave Multif, her beautiful body stretched on a Damascus rug of priceless value, her eager eyes searching the blue waters of the Bosphorus.

On this particular morning—my lady had just stepped into her boat—the young man was seen to raise himself on his elbow, lift his eyelids, and a slight flush suffused his swarthy cheeks. Then came an order in a low voice, and the caique swerved in its course and headed for the dot of white and gold in which sat Multif and my lady. The Spanish caballero haunts the sidewalk and watches all day beneath his Dulcinea's balcony; or he talks to her across the opera-house or bull-ring with cigarette, fingers, and cane, she replying with studied movements of her fan. In the empire of Mohammed, with a hundred eyes on watch—eyes of eunuchs, spies, and parents—love-making is reduced to a passing glance, brief as a flash of light, and sometimes as blinding.

That was all that took place when the two caiques passed—just a thinning of the silken veil, with only one fold of the

yashmak slipped over the eyes, softening the fire of their beauty; then a quick, all-enfolding, all-absorbing look, as if she would drink into her very soul the man she loved, and the two tiny boats kept each on its way.

The second act of the comedy opens in a small cove, an indent of the Bosphorus, out of sight of passing boat-patrols —out of sight, too, of inquisitive wayfarers passing along the highroad from Beicos to Danikeui. Above the cove, running from the very beach, sweeps a garden, shaded by great trees and tangles of underbrush; one bunch smothering a summer-house. This is connected by a sheltered path with the little white house that nestles among the firs half-way up the steep brown hill that overlooks the village of Beicos.

The water-patrol may have been friendly, or my lady's favorite slave resourceful, but almost every night for weeks the first caique and the second caique had lain side by side in the boat-house in the cove, both empty, except for one trusty man who loved Mahmoud and who did his bidding without murmur or question, no matter what the danger. Higher up, her loose white robes splashed with the molten silver of the moon filtering through overhanging leaves, where even the nightingale stopped to listen, could be heard the cooing of two voices. Then would come a warning cry, and a figure closely veiled would speed up the path. Next could be heard the splash of oars of the first caique homeward bound.

Locksmiths are bunglers in the East compared to patrols and eunuchs. Lovers may smile, but they never laugh at them. There is always a day of reckoning. A whisper goes around; some disgruntled servant shakes his head; and an old fellow with baggy trousers and fez, says: "My daughter, I am surprised" or "pained" or "outraged," or whatever he

does say in polite Turkish, Arabic, or Greek, and my lady is locked up on bread and water, or fig-paste, or Turkish Delight, and all is over. Sometimes the young Lothario is ordered back to his regiment, or sent to Van or Trebizond or Egypt for the good of his morals, or his health or the community in which he lives. Sometimes everybody accepts the situation and the banns are called and they live happy ever after.

What complicated this situation was that the girl, although as beautiful as a dream—any number of dreams, for that matter, and all of paradise—was a plebeian and the young man of royal blood. Furthermore, any number of parents, her own two and twice as many uncles and aunts, might get together and give, not only their blessing, but lands and palaces—two on the Bosphorus, one in Bagdad and another at Smyrna, and nothing would avail unless his Imperial Highness the Sultan gave his consent. Fruthermore, again, should it come to the ears of his August Presence that any such scandalous alliance was in contemplation, several yards of additional bow-strings would be purchased and the whole coterie experience a choking sensation which would last them the balance of their lives.

Thus it was that, after that most blissful night in the arbor—their last—in which she had clung to him as if knowing he was about to slip forever from her arms, both caiques were laid up for the season; the first tight locked and guarded in the palace of the young man's father, five miles along the blue Bosphorus as the bird flies, and the second in the little boat-house in the small indent of a cove under the garden holding the beloved arbor, the little white house, and My Lady of the diaphanous veil and the all-absorbing eyes.

With the lifting of the curtain on the third act, the scene shifts. No more Sweet Waters, no more caiques nor stolen interviews, the music of hot kisses drowned in the splash of the listening fountain. Instead, there is seen a sumptuously furnished interior the walls wainscoted in Moorish mosaics and lined by broad divans covered with silken rugs. Small tables stand about holding trays of cigarettes and sweets. Over against a window overlooking a garden lounges a group of women—some young, some old, one or two of them black as coal. It is the harem of the Pasha, the father of Mahmoud, Prince of the Rising Sun, Chosen of the Faithful, Governor of a province, and of forty other things beside—most of which Joe had forgotten.

Months had passed since that night in the arbor. Yuleima had cried her eyes out, and Mahmoud had shaken his fists and belabored his head, swearing by the beard of the Prophet that come what might Yuleima should be his.

Then came the death of the paternal potentate, and the young lover was free—free to come and go, to love, to hate; free to follow the carriage of his imperial master in his race up the hill after the ceremony of the Selamlik; free to choose any number of Yuleimas for his solace; free to do whatever pleased him—except to make the beautiful Yuleima his spouse. This the High-Mightinesses forbade. There were no personal grounds for their objection. The daughter of the rich Bagdad merchant was as gentle as a doe, beautiful as a star seen through the soft mists of the morning, and of stainless virtue. Her father had ever been a loyal subject, giving of his substance to both church and state, but there were other things to consider, among them a spouse especially selected by a council of High Pan-Jams, whose decision, having been approved by their imperial master, was not only binding, but final—so final that death awaited any one who would dare oppose it. At the feast of

Ramazan the two should wed. Yuleima might take second, third, or fortieth place—but not first.

The young prince gritted his row of white teeth and flashed his slumbering eyes—and they could flash—blaze sometimes—with a fire that scorched. Yuleima would be his, unsullied in his own eyes and the world's, or she should remain in the little white house on the brown hill and continue to blur her beautiful eyes with the tears of her grief.

Then the favorite slave and the faithful caique-ji—the one who found the little cove even on the darkest night—put their heads together—two very cunning and wise heads, one black and wrinkled and the other sun-tanned and yellow—with the result that one night a new odalisque, a dark-skinned, black-haired houri, the exact opposite of the fair-skinned, fair-haired Yuleima, joined the coterie in the harem of the palace of the prince. She had been bought with a great price and smuggled into Stamboul, the story ran, a present from a distinguished friend of his father, little courtesies like this being common in Oriental countries, as one would send a bottle of old Madeira from his cellar or a choice cut of venison from his estate, such customs as is well known being purely a matter of geography.

The chief blackamoor, a shambling, knock-kneed, round-shouldered, swollen-paunched apology for a man, with blistered, cracked lips, jaundiced pig eyes, and the skin of a terrapin, looked her all over, grunted his approval, and with a side-lunge of his fat empty head, indicated the divan which was to be hers during the years of her imprisonment.

One night some words passed between the two over the division of bonbons, perhaps, or whose turn it was to take

afternoon tea with the prince—it had generally been the new houri's, resulting in considerable jealousy and consequent discord—or some trifle of that sort (Joe had never been in a harem, and was therefore indefinite), when the blackamoor, to punctuate his remarks, slashed the odalisque across her thinly covered shoulders with a knout—a not uncommon mode of enforcing discipline, so Joe assured me.

Then came the great scene of the third act—always the place for it, so dramatists say.

The dark-skinned houri sprang up, rose to her full height, her eyes blazing, and facing her tormentor, cried:

"You blackguard"—a true statement—"do you know who I am?"

"Yes, perfectly; you are Yuleima, the daughter of the Bagdad merchant."

The fourth act takes place on the outskirts of Stamboul, in a small house surrounded by a high wall which connects with the garden of a mosque. The exposure by the eunuch had resulted in an investigation by the palace clique, which extended to the Bagdad merchant and his family, who, in explanation, not only denounced her as an ungrateful child, cursing her for her opposition to her sovereign's will, but denied all knowledge of her whereabouts. They supposed, they pleaded, that she had thrown herself into the Bosphorus at the loss of her lover. Then followed the bundling up of Yuleima in the still watches of the night; her bestowal at the bottom of a caique, her transfer to Stamboul, and her incarceration in charge of an attendant in a deserted house belonging to the mosque. The rumor was then set on foot that it was unlawful to look steadily

into the waters of the Bosphorus or to attempt the salvage of any derelict body floating by.

The prince made another assault on his hair and tightened his fingers, this time with a movement as if he was twisting them round somebody's throat, but he made no outcry. It is hard to kick against the pricks in some lands.

He did not believe the bow-string pillow-case and solid-shot story, but he knew that he should never look upon her face again. What he did believe was that she had been taken to some distant city and there sold.

For days he shut himself up in his palace. Then, having overheard a conversation in his garden between two eunuchs—placed there for that purpose—he got together a few belongings, took his faithful caique-ji, and travelled a-field. If what he had heard was true she was in or near Damascus. Here would he go. If, after searching every nook and cranny, he failed to find her, he would return and carry out his sovereign's commands and marry the princess—a woman he had never laid his eyes on and who might be as ugly as sin and as misshapen as Yuleima was beautiful. It was while engaged in this fruitless search that he met Joseph, to whom he had poured out his heart (so Joe assured me, with his hand on his shirt-front), hoping to enlist his sympathies and thus gain his assistance.

All this time the heartbroken girl, rudely awakened from her dream of bliss, was a prisoner in the deserted house next the mosque. As the dreary months went by her skin regained its pinkness and her beautiful hair its golden tint —walnut shells and cosmetics not being found in the private toilet of the priests and their companions. When the summer came a greater privilege was given her. She could