

## THE SMILE OF THE SPHINX

By ROBERT NICHOLS

## I.

**L**ONG, long ago there dwelt in the pleasant City-of-Towers a young princess of immense riches and of such exceeding beauty that none other could be compared to her. So famous, indeed, became the riches of her beauty and her possessions, that were only less than her beauty, that she was sought in marriage by every kind of personage. In three moons the train of her suitors, or mounted upon gold-stencilled elephants, tassel-fringed camels, palfries of Arabia, ponies of Astrakhan, mules of Nubia, or faring but upon the Sandals-of-Nature along the Road-of-Advantage, became so huge that the citizens of the City-of-Towers being eaten (albeit at no small price) out of hearth and home, petitioned the princely father of the damsel to mitigate, in whatever sort he should think fit, the good fortune of their city, which, possessing such a treasure as the princess Sa-adeh, the Bestower-of-Felicity, admitted to finding its pleasure rather in reflecting upon the value of their jewel than in entertaining those who came to steal it. The ever-benevolent Prince accordingly issued a decree that no suitor was to approach the Princess save on the understanding that if he failed to win her affections his head should pay the forfeit. Forthwith ensued so remarkable a diminution in the number of her suitors that, in a short while, only those whom the Light-of-Love's-Eyes had guided or those whom the Three-thonged-Scourge-of-Need had driven remained mounted or standing before the palace gates. Nor did these linger overlong, for the heart of the Princess was less easily softened than that of the Executioner, who with one sweep of the scimitar relieved the Lover of the Burden-of-Love or severed the Needy from the Vessel-of-Need. Then the beautiful Sa-adeh, the Bestower-of-Felicity, not unfatigued by such a succession of maidenly preoccupations, determined that for a little she would forget the Bonds-of-Necessity and atone somewhat to the citizens of the City-of-Towers for the inconveniences she had brought them. To this end she caused a special litter of cedar wood to be constructed, and, mounting therein, sallied forth to bestow upon the citizens of the City-of-Towers the hitherto-unseen and almost-unendurable beauty of her face.

Now it happened that in this city there was then dwelling a young scribe by name Es-siddeeh, that is the Very Veracious. This youth, the height of whose beauty was almost as remarkable as the depth of his wisdom, had spent the greater number of his days in study; so much so, in fact, that he had never cast his eyes upon a woman to love her, and this in spite of the possession of an enchanting smile, Nature's gift to him, of the power of which he was hardly conscious. Surrounded by parchments, having hung about his neck many little scrolls, with his tablet laid across his knees,

daily he sat in his window and, while the traffic flowed by and the crowd shrilled more loudly than a flock of parakeets, raised not his eyes from his papyrus nor regarded any sound but the squeaking of his stylus-reed.

Thus, then, was he sitting when the troating of horns and the bombilation of gongs proclaimed the nearing of the Princess in her progress. But Es-siddeeh paid this din no attention and, though the fantastic shadows of many majestically-apparelled persons fell across his page, lifted not the Gatherers-of-Knowledge from the Leaves-of-Enlightenment. Meanwhile Sa-adeh, lying in her litter, enjoyed a certain satisfaction in the pleasurable recognition the gracious bestowal of the sight of her countenance procured the citizens. This satisfaction she told herself, as the procession advanced, was increased rather than diminished by the spectacle of certain bleared scribes, who, with ears already attached by cobwebs to the lintels of their doors, never lifted eyes as she passed. "For," she reflected, "such insensibility affords me a scale by which to gauge the pleasure I bestow elsewhere."

At this moment she arrived opposite Es-siddeeh's window.

Then the young scribe, feeling the gaze of another fixed upon him, looked up. And the eyes of Es-siddeeh exchanged thoughts with the eyes of Sa-adeh. When he bent to the tablet again, behold the words were to him but foolishness. All the afternoon he sat there wondering why he had spent his youth upon such things as now appeared to him the very vanity of vanities, colourless and the occupation of the myopic. At evenfall, driven abroad by a terrible restlessness, he wandered outside the walls of the city, but the murmuring of the breeze through the groves did but increase his distraction. Toward midnight he returned and, after spending the remainder of the night without sleep, informed his parents of his intention to turn suitor. Greatly perturbed, they besought him to relinquish so hopeless a project. In vain! at the third hour he proceeded to the palace. The gates were shut. When they did at last open he found himself face to face with the Executioner. Involuntarily he recoiled.

"No alms will be given to-day," said the Reliever-of-Headaches.

"I have not come for alms. I wish to see the porter."

"I am the porter."

"I thought you were——"

"So I was. But now that job is at an end. The capacity to love as our forefathers loved is passing away. Even a spirit of commercial enterprise is lacking. The world goes from bad to worse. Yesterday I cut off the heads of princes; to-day I open the door to mendicants. On no one is Fortune harder than I."

"I find that last reflection," returned the scribe, "so general that I grow convinced it must be true. But be of good cheer. Strange as it may seem, I am the bearer of good tidings. There is every likelihood of your shortly resuming your distinguished office—I have come as a suitor to the Princess."

"Have you, indeed? Ha, ha, ha! The coin is as good as earned. . . . However . . . excuse my entertainment. I should not laugh; for

understand my heart goes out to you in your public-spirited endeavour not to permit my office to lapse. Ah, if there were only more men of your kidney, and yet . . . I regret to have to add that you will not profit me much. For make no mistake, I am a Republican; I believe that handsome is as handsome does. It is therefore my custom to request a little honorarium, in ratio to the means of my customer, in return for the service I render him. For this is a service which is unique, in that he probably has no servant in his suite trained to perform this duty for him, and it is besides a service for which the requirement of one small fee cannot be described as extortionate since the duty is one which being once satisfactorily performed does not require to be repeated."

"But I have not yet incurred the penalty."

"You will. Be reassured and, having no troublesome misgivings on this count, hand me that which in a few hours it will be too late for me to ask."

Ed-siddeeh smiled. "Are you not paid by the Court?" he asked.

"I am," replied the other, softening, "and a beggarly wage it is, too, which compels me to make these requisitions. However, since you seem, for all your queer dress, a pleasant fellow, I will reduce my charge."

"Good. I feared I should never be able to pay—my means are so scanty."

"I should inform you that it is as well to pay because, if you do not, my arm, unstrengthened by the sinews of charity, may not perform its office with quite that address which is at once a delight to the spectators and a matter of self-gratification to my customer."

"Your magnanimity," replied the scribe, giving the man a coin, "does indeed bear witness to the superiority of your mind to its present situation and deserves a reward. I hope you will see that I am not disappointed of an interview."

Thereupon the Executioner conducted him into the palace and, leaving him in an inner apartment, acquainted one of the attendant damsels with the object of the scribe's visit.

For some time the maid regarded his dress dubiously.

"I should be grateful if you would inform the Princess of my arrival, for I cannot say that I find the sound of the Executioner in the courtyard below sharpening his scimitar on a wheel affords me as much pleasure as by his expression it affords him."

She vanished through the curtains, and the following conversation was borne to Es-siddeeh's ears:

"A young man calling himself the Very Veracious has arrived and sues for an interview on the same subject as his forerunners."

"I cannot see him." The maid returned.

"Tell her," said Es-siddeeh, "that she is as beautiful as one red rose in a garden of lilies."

"The compliment," he heard the Princess remark, "is a new one and is graceful. Nevertheless dismiss him."

"Tell her," said Es-siddeeh, "that her wisdom has the wings of the

ruk, the eye of the falcon, the talons of the osprey, and the voice of the dove."

"It is very remarkable," he heard the Princess remark, "that he should so accurately describe my characteristics. He must be a diviner; since, as far as I know, he has never seen me nor spoken to me. Nevertheless dismiss him."

"Tell her," said Es-siddeeh—but he could not think of anything to tell her and was sadly cast down. For his love, continuing to pain him, tortured him as a sweet fire in his bosom. At length, bethinking himself of his wisdom, he said in as brusque a tone as he could summon, "Tell her that I know the answer to all secrets and that she will regret it if she dismiss me."

"How now?" cried the Princess, "is he so clever, and has such courage? He will indeed be the Very Veracious if, possessing these answers, he depart immediately, for then my womanish regret will indeed be sharp; since of all humours, he has had the wit to see, this humour of curiosity is the one most deeply implanted in us. Of what complexion is he?"

"He is of spare build; his hair is black and glossy as that of a black panther; in his eyes there is a dark fire. His clothes are by no means new, his fingers are stained with ink, and about his neck there is a necklace of little scrolls."

"A necklace of little scrolls, did you say? Send him in."

Then Es-siddeeh stepped into her presence, and it was to him as if he were a little planet drawn for the first time into the orbit of the sun.

She commanded him to be seated and plied him with various questions concerning the value as an amulet of this or that precious stone, of the pedigree of famous horses, music as Emotional Sound or as an Architecture, and many other matters of a similar nature.

All these questions he answered not only discreetly, but with wit.

For some time she rested her eyes upon his face in a musing fashion. Then, with a strange inflection, she asked, "What is love?"

"I have but just beheld the cause," he returned; "give me a little space and I infer its properties as a consequence. At present I am troubled to know whether the same vessel can contain both cause and consequence."

Not without haste, she assured him that she would consider her question answered, and enquired, "Does it become thee to risk so wise a head at the bidding of so foolish a heart?"

"It lay not, and does not lie, with me to make it becoming."

This answer did not appear to please her, for, moving her head, she proceeded with an instant change of tone, "One thing I have ever desired to know. What is the secret of the smile of the Sphinx?"

He was taken aback.

"What? Canst thou not answer, thou who didst assert that thou hadst in thy bosom the answer to all secrets, O Very Veracious one?"

Seeing her smiling, he replied, "I have not seen the Sphinx unless I see her now."

"I perceive that thou canst not answer. Yet because of thy youth and thy beauty I will spare thee."

"Spare me not, since before thou hast not spared me."

"Upon one condition:—that shouldst thou wish again to see me thou shalt bring with thee the secret of the Sphinx's smile. And now, before thou leavest me, because thou wert not as insensible as most scribes are wont to be, but wast willing to assay to gain some knowledge of perfection from life as well as from thy scrolls, I will give thee a token to take with thee."

At these words, as if some beneficent and invisible djinn had escaped from his bottle, a spirit of strange sweetness seemed to fill the room. Strength forsook the body of Es-siddeeh.

"Come hither," she murmured.

So Es-siddeeh went to her and bowed down with his face to the floor.

Then the Princess took him very gently in her arms and, raising his head, placed one hand beneath his locks and the other over his eyes, and so kissed him.

Now when Es-siddeeh felt the touch of her hands, cool as water lilies upon him; smelled the delicate smell of her bosom, more mysterious than any perfume of the mages; tasted her mouth's nectar, more precious than the combed honey of the blessed in Paradise, then indeed he knew there to be such a seal coldly pressed upon his heart that the stamp of it would not be erased all the days of his life.

"Ah, merciless," said he, "thou hast indeed not spared me. Now must I inevitably return."

"It was for that reason I gave it thee," she said.

## II.

He hurried home. He sold all his belongings.

His father, seeing him about to depart, cried, "Thou wilt break thy mother's heart."

He could not reply.

His mother, watching him set out upon his mule with a slender bag of coin in his hands, cursed him and the Princess.

He did not look back.

## III.

After a journey of three moons he arrived before the Sphinx.

His first impression was that her countenance contained no such difficult riddle as he had been led to suppose. The body of the Sphinx was huge, her paws stretched in front formidable, her shoulders heavy. Her bandeletted head sustained a wedge-fronted tiara. All this he took in at a glance. Then he turned to the face. He had not expected it to be so close to the ground and so open to inspection. The forehead he could see was ample. The eyebrows, albeit contracted in a slight frown, were high, arched, and wide, which lent the upper part of the face a frank

expression; but the reverie of the eyes, fixed on space, seemed somewhat dimmed—as if an impalpable hand had interposed itself between the gazing orbs and the sun. The smoothness and delicate moulding of the cheeks and chin were remarkable. The nose astonished by the firm subtlety of its outline, which gave to the face a simultaneous expression of suavity and undeviating determination. If the nose had provoked wonder the mouth was yet more amazing. The lips, which might have been gracious and full when parted, were so closely compressed in their smile as to modify the whole effect of the other features.

“I must go nearer,” said Es-siddeeh.

He established himself almost between the paws of the monster, for monster she had become to him who now beheld her mien more clearly—a mien disfigured, yet seeming uncaring for its own disfigurement, and—greatest horror of all—a mien in which the eyes possessed irises but seemingly no pupils. For a little he considered returning. Then he said to himself, “No; to see her afar off gives a false impression. One should see her as she is, and earnestly scanning the visage wrestle in thought till one discovers the secret of the smile.” In this he instinctively knew himself to be right.

But he was not long in finding that the more and the closer he stared the more difficult the problem became. To begin with the blemishes distracted him overmuch. The main cast of the face appeared, though subtle, simple and grand enough, but the fissures between the blocks that composed it, the discolorations, and the crevices that ran from side to side confused his eye. “If it were only perfect, all would be much easier to discover,” he murmured. Then, too, the expression of the Sphinx and the import of the smile seemed to vary with the changes of the weather. On fresh-blowing sunny days the image beamed on him with a shadow-dappled, bleached cheerfulness of resignation. But when the sun raged the face, too, raged as with an inward fury; its lineaments shook in the heat-eddies that arose from the sand, and every grain glowed like a particle of fire. Nor did its rage abate during the succeeding night. The rising of the tropic moon gave to its complexion, streaked with violet shadows, an ashen hue: the pallidity of an unappeasable and frustrated anger. On lowering days it blackly scowled, and the swollen nostrils and imperious mouth assumed the similitude of being endowed only with the bitterest irony, a constancy of cruelty and an unquestionable scorn. Then he hated it.

At last, perceiving that the secret was not to be gained in a few days or even in a few moons, he resolved to settle in the desert opposite the Sphinx.

Three years passed.

Day by day and night by night Es-siddeeh watched the Sphinx. Daily the sun, shining upon the surface of the mask, seemed to make it more impenetrable, and nightly the moon, deepening the shadows in the crevices, increased its mystery. Round about the knoll, which the pilgrim had selected for his station, the sand gave off a glare more deadly than the bed of a furnace or, rising in whirlwind-spouts whose tops spattered ashes upon him, circled

his island like monstrous and infuriate djinns. Toward sunset the clouds, gathered in an awful and silent grandeur, discharged, with stunning clap and reverberations as of mountains overthrown, their lightnings, a shower of blue arrows, to all quarters of the fluttering horizon. Once indeed Es-siddeeh awoke to behold a body of dense vapour launch itself wrathfully downward against the head of the brooding Sphinx and wreath it with a crown of crackling fire. The scribe leaped up, and, despite the pressure of the blast, succeeded in gaining, not without considerable risk to himself, a position before the base of the monster. His courage was unrewarded. Upon that obstinate mien, livid in the tawny light, the rain glistened as if there had indeed started from the stony pores a ghastly dew; but the thin lips were as tightly compressed as ever. "Hideous Sphinx!" exclaimed the youth, "thou cruelty incarnate, cannot even the ire of the gods subdue thee? Shall I never, from some motion of thy visage, learn what secret thou hidest?"

As the winter approached the wilderness, utterly denuded of weed or moss, grew vaster and more bleak. The nights turned frosty. Overhead the constellations increased in splendour and number until every quarter of the empyrean shone encrusted with stars. Against these brilliant galaxies and the diffused, pervasive effulgence of countless further bodies the forehead of the Sphinx outlined itself in desolate and stubborn majesty.

Then was it that, alone amid the desert, under the gaze of those myriad and so distant lights, facing the figure of the Sphinx, now blacker and more impenetrable than ever, Es-siddeeh reached the climacteric which is despair. Baffled, without any sensation but an exasperation that gnawed his very reins and made giddy his temples, he spent his days and nights in complete dejection. At length, wishing, to terminate his sufferings once and for all he approached the Sphinx and, vehemently hammering its breast with his fists, cried in a terrible voice, "*What is the secret of thy smile, O Sphinx?*"

But the Sphinx did not answer.

At dawn, impotent before the titan, he perceived upon the surface of her bosom bloodmarks hitherto unobserved. Other hands beside his own, then, had knocked upon that stony breast. He returned to his hovel and stretched himself down in a sleep that was like a stupor. On waking he determined to climb the bandelettes of the Sphinx and to cast himself from its forehead. He had scarcely taken a step when, exhausted by privation and prolonged anguish of mind, he fell, and lying helpless found himself fronting a face mirrored in a pool, the product of a shower which had fallen while he slept. The face was the face of one whose visage was slowly approximating to that of the Sphinx, but it lacked the smile, and in its eyes there was the light of imminent insanity. For a space he gazed without realising the apparition to be but his own reflection. Then—stiffening his arms that he might raise his head and shoulders, extended, as he was, upon the desert like a Syrian puma whose bowels are transfixed by an arrow and

who is about to die—he rallied his strength for a last effort. Before him, a quivering tigress in the meridian sunshine, crouched the colossal Sphinx. The frustrated eyes of the scribe, nigh starting from their sockets, bent upon it such a glare as sought to penetrate its very soul. Yet at the last, heaving himself forward, with nostrils wrinkled and teeth bared as if in the very coughing frenzy of a fighting death, he could but ejaculate “Sphinx, now had I entreated thine aid!—hadst thou not rendered me too proud, who have discovered thee to be but stone.”

Then the Sphinx answered in a voice of thunder :

“O man, aid thyself!”

#### IV.

A company of Bedawi, journeying across the desert, discovered him lying senseless. Him they succoured as a madman, and therefore sacred to the gods.

For a while he rested in a pleasant city, enjoying the support of a good man, who did not understand the cause of his afflictions, but at once realised their intensity and the deep importance to Es-siddeeh of the search on which he was engaged. His health mended at length and undeterred by the solicitations of his host, troubled to see him in such haste, he resumed his investigations. This time he did not attempt to wrestle the secret from the Sphinx herself, but determined to prosecute his enquiries among the learned.

With this end in view he interrogated the chief scholars of that district, but, coming to the conclusion that they were too provincial, he made his way to Jerusalem. Here no answer at all was given him—save that by the study of the particular law made for a particular tribe and containing, as he himself was obliged to admit, the most admirable rules for the preservation of an individual or a clan, he would attain to a knowledge of all things.

He determined to go to Greece, the fountain-head of knowledge. But in Athens he fared not much better. The majority of the inhabitants, the fascination of whose minds he had nevertheless to admit, seemed given up to the fervour of local politics, money-making, the quarrels of the law-courts, the consideration of athletics, the technique of the chase, and the refinement of trivial or voluptuous delights : pursuits which he told himself could scarcely further true knowledge. There were, however, a number of persons, given to the study of natural law as revealed in nature, who enquired whether he had weighed the Sphinx or examined her molecules beneath the magnifying crystal. He was compelled to reply that he had done neither of these things. Whereat they retorted that it was therefore impossible for them to build a theory as to the constituents of her smile and verify it in experiment. “Moreover,” they continued, “even the data you have given us appear not only insufficient but contradictory, since you state that the smile is at once sweet and sour. Direct opposites cannot be reconciled in science. We think it therefore best to direct you to the school of metaphysics opposite, where, if we are to judge from the uproar which occasionally



disturbs our precincts, we believe this feat to be daily accomplished." . . . .  
 Es-siddeeh accordingly lost no time in entering the school opposite. After a lengthy session, the clamour of which somewhat bewildered him, a young man with a high complexion and a shrill voice approached him and said, "As far as can be ascertained (for there are the usual number of qualifications and reservations of opinion amongst us) we are of a mind that the secret of the Sphinx is that she has no secret—at least no secrets from us."

Es-siddeeh did not stop to enquire further, for it appeared to him that he could not gain by it and, moreover, he was much fatigued. So, taking boat, he sailed through the Pillars of Hercules and, turning north, descried, after an arduous voyage, the extreme Western Isles enshrouded in a perpetual prismatic fog. On these coasts he landed and, penetrating inland, in a short while discovered a university situated on the chief river of the main island. Having struck up an acquaintance with the courteous master of the chief college, he poured out his tale. The Disseminator-of-Truth, after prolonged thought, replied, "Without wishing in any way to influence your conduct, I should, since you seem to be enamoured of the lady, inform her that the secret is anything you happen to have in your head at the moment (as well it may be), provided the matter be of such obscurity that that instinct which is peculiar to females, and which on the best authority (namely, their own) I am given to understand is infallible, will instantly assure her that she understands it even better than you do."

"But you would not have me deceive her?"

"Indeed, no. For recollect—what she believes to be true will *per contra* be true to her."

"It seems to me, then, that you are asking her to deceive herself."

"Not at all," answered the Sage somewhat impatiently; "all is, you must know, relative, and any conclusion is as relative to enquiry as any other."

"But not to truth!" returned Es-siddeeh with heat.

The great man smiled. "An irritating preoccupation this, when the search itself is so intriguing."

Es-siddeeh, the Very Veracious, experienced a curious sensation in which pleasure certainly played a part. "That is perfectly true," he remarked; "I am finding more interest in the search than I expected. Nevertheless I wish to return to Sa-adeh, the Bestower-of-Felicity" (and at her name he was conscious of an inexplicable spasm of contrition), "and to present her with my conclusion—the Truth."

"Here I think we part," said the other suddenly. "Farewell."

Then, as he turned away, the elder flung over his shoulder, "For myself, old-fashioned being that I am, I am inclined to think the truth is that the secret of the smile of the Sphinx is not one that should be repeated to a lady."

It was some time before Es-siddeeh recovered from the shock of this interview. When he had done so, he hastened to leave the country and to betake himself to the Furthest East. The voyage lasted three years. But,

when he posed his question to the head of a Manchu university, what was his surprise to be countered with just such a suggestion as had been put to him in the extreme Isles of the Western Hemisphere!

"But you forget my name," he exclaimed.

"No; for indeed so eager have you been to enquire of me the secret of the Sphinx and to narrate to me the story of your quest that you have forgotten to acquaint me with your name."

"I am named Es-siddeeh, which, being translated, is the Very Veracious."

"Then, my middle-aged young man of redoubtable veracity, I advise you to abandon your quest and to despair at once. It is much quicker. In such a mood you will discover yourself becoming most pleasantly the prey of one of the unmarried maidens who abound hereabout and who, I assure you, are not less beautiful and certainly less exacting than your friend. For women, according to the sage's experience, are much the same the whole world over—a morsel of honey in which the bee has left his sting: without the sting no honey, and no honey no sting."

"Sir," replied the scribe, "I am much indebted to you, but you know neither Sa-adeh nor the secret of the Sphinx."

"I do not indeed, but I venture to think that to propose to oneself a question that cannot immediately be answered is not the conduct of a wise man and may very well give offence to Powers of which we are becomingly ignorant."

Utterly wearied by the enquiries he had prosecuted among the learned, Es-siddeeh turned over in his mind the many types he had encountered in his wanderings and, recollecting the lively intelligence of those Athenians who were not of the learned professions, he determined to live after their manner that perchance he might hap upon the secret. Several years were spent in acquiring sufficient money. The subsequent spending taught him that his mind was apt to wander from the problem in the mere enjoyment of the moment. Before, however, he could make finally sure whether he was any nearer gaining a solution he found himself ruined. Turned soldier, he took part in many notable engagements and distinguished himself not a little. The itch of the excitement of the search was for the time being eclipsed by the perils and responsibilities of war. There were, too, other distractions, nor were these invariably the bodiless preoccupations of the mind. . . . It was the somewhat unpleasant termination of one of these episodes which plunged him into reverie upon the past. At midnight, silently rising from his rose-strewn couch, he determined there and then to bring to the contemplation of the Sphinx that store of varied knowledge which he had gathered in the course of his wanderings. Arrayed, then, in a dress similar to that which he had worn as a youth and encircling his neck with a necklace of scrolls he set out alone for the desert.

Since the way was long and he no longer young, a year passed ere he approached his goal.

Then once again Es-siddeeh stood before the Sphinx.

## V.

In the moonlight it seemed to him that during his thirty years of absence the image had grown larger. That his eyes, accustomed to watch for unexpected perils, played him no tricks he was certain, yet he now observed the brow of the Sphinx to be wreathed in a faint vapour as if its crest had attained the altitude of no inconsiderable hill. The fissures between the stones seemed slightly to have filled, but the crevices across the face were both more numerous and more deeply scored. The pits of the eyes, too, had become immensely more cavernous. And—could he be mistaken?—was not the smile less ambiguous? Surely he did not remember the visage as so noble, or had it grown nobler in his absence? How was it that, though the aspect remained as unflinching as ever, the expression now seemed less hard and more magnanimously stern? The cheeks had undoubtedly sunk further, but did not the muscles appear tightened less in impatience than in endurance of suffering? The nostrils no longer breathed scorn; they laboured with the indrawing of breath that, like fire, was at once painful and inspiriting. To the brow there had been added, he thought, a faint line, and its coming had softened the contraction of the brows so that the creature appeared even more majestic and wiser than of yore. And lastly—he took long to discover this—in the shadow under the brows the orbs seemed to stir with a mysterious and darkling life. “O mighty Sphinx,” he murmured, leaning his head upon her bosom, “what has come to thee? How art thou changed! Much I fear thou hast passed beyond so small, feeble, and ignoble an intelligence as I and that now I shall never learn the secret that, behind thy lips, lies locked in thy heart. O Sphinx, if I speak wilt thou answer? Time was when I came to thee and, impatiently stamping my foot upon the mound of thy illimitable desert, beating with my fists thine unanswering flesh, conjured thee in a voice of thunder to yield up thy secret. But to-night, nestling against thy bosom, how shall I speak to thee?—I, of less account among men than one of the myriad morsels of dust out of which thou art compounded; I, whose voice is to thine ears hardly louder than the scratch of the beetles that crawl about thy base; I, lost in the shadowy cleft between thy breasts? O Sphinx, I will not cry out to thine unregarding face, lost in such a reverie as transcends the thought of such as myself, but leaning here my fevered forehead against thy cool stones, as in a dream and scarcely expecting an answer, let me whisper to thy heart, ‘*What is the secret of thy smile, O Sphinx?*’”

Then from within the Sphinx arose a deep murmuring as of a multitude of nigh-forgotten voices; a handful of vapour parted from the lips to wither in the glacial moonshine.

“Scarcely am I changed,” said the Sphinx. “’Tis thou art changed. Look in thy heart: there is my secret.”

So low had been the sound, so immense was the night, so lonely the desert, that Es-siddeeh doubted whether it was not his own heart that had

spoken. Then, placing both hands against the breast of the colossus, he cried in a despairing voice, "Is that thy all, O Sphinx?"

But there was no answer.

With spirit heavy as death, Ed-siddeeh wrapped him in his cloak and laid him down to sleep between the paws.

"Alas," said he to himself, "how brief, how obscure, and how profitless seem all the answers given to man!" Yet, when the morning came, it occurred to him that, if the Sphinx had indeed spoken, he would do well to ponder the words.

So for three moons he sat pondering: "*Scarcely am I changed. 'Tis thou art changed. Look in thy heart: there is my secret.*"

Those who crossed the desert marked him, sunk in the deepest travail of thought.

"Why do you not look at the Sphinx?" they asked.

"I begin to know something about it: that is why," he replied. "If I gazed at it always in the present and never in memory I should learn nothing."

One day a young scribe of great beauty approached the Sphinx and in a low tone enquired: "*What is the secret of thy smile, O Sphinx?*"

"Speak louder. She will not hear you," called his companion.

Es-siddeeh leaped to his feet.

"Who sent thee hither?" he cried.

"Sa-adeh, the Bestower-of-Felicity," answered the youth; and turning to his comrade, "If you wish to know why I do not shout, know that it is because I have read the early work of a certain scribe Es-siddeeh. It is very evident that, as with many persons of original mind, he scarcely recognised the full import of what he was at the time writing. Had he been acquainted with more scholars and had more experience of life he would have spoken with greater certainty. He would have also realised, too, I do not doubt, that his work was not so vain as it then appeared to him. But he disappeared and none knows whither, since his parents never spoke of him again. I, taking up his work, have already carried it further, I think, than he had when he abandoned it. Nevertheless I, too, have ceased to labour at it and am come hither for the purpose thou knowest."

"Sa-adeh," echoed Es-siddeeh, waking as if from a dream; "I seem to remember that name. Tell me now, how did you——"

But the stranger, receiving no reply from the Sphinx, had departed.

Es-siddeeh sat him down again in dejection.

That night he did not sleep. The memory of Sa-adeh overcame him with tears. All his life passed in review. Never had his reverie seemed so bitter, his questioning so futile as on that midnight, yet toward dawn he suddenly stood up with a shout. An immeasurable serenity flooded his being.

"I have it," he cried; "I have solved the secret of thy smile, O Sphinx!"

At that moment the tropic sun arose, and in its rays he beheld the face of the tormentor shine with an equable and golden splendour. The eyes, no longer lacking pupils, possessed sight, and from the smile had vanished all that he detested.

## VI.

A new porter, a garrulous and slipshod wastrel, had taken the place of the old. It appeared that nowadays the Princess had but few visitors despite the fact that she was acknowledged almost as beautiful as ever, albeit in a different style. Her temperament, he learned, was difficult, her wealth greater than ever.

After but short delay he found himself in the antechamber. He acquainted the damsel with his mission. She vanished through the curtains, and the following conversation was borne to Es-siddeeh's ears :

"An old man, calling himself the Very Veracious, has arrived and sues for an interview on the same subject as his forerunners."

"I cannot see him." The maid returned.

"Tell her," said Es-siddeeh, "that she is as beautiful as one red rose in a garden of lilies."

"The compliment," he heard the Princess remark, "though graceful, is not new; in fact so old that I scarcely distinctly recollect when I made a fashion for it. Dismiss him."

"Tell her," said Es-siddeeh, "that her wisdom has the wings of the rukh, the eye of the falcon, the talons of the osprey, and the voice of the dove."

"The Very Veracious," he heard the Princess remark, "is there very much in the wrong. If I have learned nothing else in my life I have at least learned that my wisdom has no such enviable characteristics. Dismiss him."

"Tell her," said Es-siddeeh, suddenly overcome with a novel misgiving, "that I know the answer to all secrets, including the secret of the smile of the Sphinx."

"How original!" cried the Princess. "Does he really know the secret of the Sphinx's smile? Send him in."

Es-siddeeh went in and bowed down.

"Though changed," he said, "O Sa-adeh, you are as beautiful as ever."

"Your beard has grown so long and so white," she answered, "that—surely thou *art* the (what is the name?) the Es-siddeeh I once knew, are you not?"

"I am."

"And you know all secrets?"

"I do."

Then she plied him with various questions concerning the value as an amulet of this or that precious stone, of the pedigree of famous horses, of music as an Emotional Sound or as an Architecture, and many other matters of a similar nature.

All these questions he answered with such a considerable wealth of detail that Sa-adeh appeared confused. Both fell silent.

After her eyes had rested for some time upon his face in a musing fashion, she asked with a strange inflection, "What is love?"

He was dumbfounded.

"I believe you have forgotten," she said, and in the intonation of her voice there was a hint of the equivocal.

His eyes filled with tears. "I have not forgotten," he said; "perhaps I am only just beginning to learn."

She gave him a curious look; then, moving her head, proceeded with an instant change of tone, "Well, what is the secret of the smile of the Sphinx?"

A wave of emotion swept over him. He smiled and arose.

"With the details of my enquiry I will not trouble you. Suffice it to say that for nearly forty years I have been searching."

"So long as that?"

"Many hard early days I spent in the desert and endured great privations."

"Indeed? I am sorry. Forget them."

"I would not if I could—they were the price of knowledge. At one time I came near losing my wits."

"So? I am sorry."

"Then I spent some years interrogating the wisest of earth."

"Oh?"

"But met with no answer."

"Ah."

"Then I spent further years in acquiring money—years of misery they were and years of degradation—that I might discover the secret. I was ruined. I repeat, I was ruined."

"Pardon me. Yes, you were ruined. I am sorry."

"I served as a soldier. I received wounds. I was captive. I was beaten. I escaped. I rose to power. I exploited all modes of living and fulfilling myself, but my experiments brought me no nearer the secret."

"No nearer. . . ."

"Then I set forth on a dreary journey to renew my memory of the Sphinx's face. I sat down beside her. For a long time I learned nothing—the smile seemed hardly less mysterious than it had ever been. Then—but you are not listening . . ."

"My friend, I am indeed; you were on a dreary journey and——"

"At length one day a youth—but I will not burden you with that, though it was strange. . . ."

"Why do you look so at me? I am listening."

"That night I learned the secret of the Sphinx."

"At last!"

"I learned it indeed."

"Yes. Well, what is it?"

“ A difficult matter. You must listen most carefully, so subtle is its sense ; yet in its comprehension lies hid the whole secret of man’s possible happiness.”

“ I am listening.”

There was a great stillness in the chamber. Es-siddeeh closed his eyes to concentrate his thought. Then, opening them, he began :

“ I learned the secret—that smile is the secret.”

“ So I supposed.”

“ Hush, or I shall begin to think that you do not know how to value this gift of my whole life, which I am making you. It is very difficult, but if all men would listen to me their lives would be easier.”

“ I thought the secret was for me—yet no matter. Proceed. You see how serious I am.”

“ I learned its secret.”

His lips trembled. He could hardly speak ; at last with a great effort he said, “ Now it comes—*upon maintaining that smile, which is the sign of the power of her existence, all her energy is bent.* She did not tell me, but I found it written in my heart. For what is she ? *In the Sphinx, with her ravaged countenance and mutilated smile, I behold Life itself—Life in mysterious might, ignorant of its own origin, conscious only of its own beauty, couchant amid the wilderness of space and eternity.*”

“ Is the smile of the Sphinx all that indeed ? I somehow thought it was something more intimate. But how serious you look ! Do not frown—I would not offend you for the world.”

“ Should I not smile ? ” he said bitterly.

“ Yes, like the Sphinx.”

“ Quick ! How, did you know that ? ”

“ Don’t frighten me. I was but speaking idly.”

“ Idly ? ”

“ Seriously then, if you like—since you attach such importance to it. Women always work by miracles and never know when they have performed one. . . . Excellent, you are smiling, though your smile is ambiguous.”

“ I do but obey her.”

“ Not me ? ”

“ That smile which we behold on her face is the smile we see everywhere about us ; only in her it has become more august—first by reason of her greater consciousness of isolation in the Desert and beneath the Stars, and, secondly, by consciousness of her strength.”

“ Will you hand me my fan ? Thank you.”

“ For what are not the properties of the smile—the sovereign beauty, the witness of power—in Nature ? Wise indeed the man who knows the bounds of what it is capable. When we are born the first thing we behold is a smile : the Nurse smiles at us, and in that smile we should read—were we then capable—the self-satisfaction of Nature, proud of her reproductive powers, who dandles us in her hands with the assurance that she knows what is best for us. Ah, how universal is the smile ! Think of the variety of smiles that exist.

'Tis all for smiles this life ! And that is at once its apparent cruelty and its final justification. On the blackness of Eternity it expands in a smile like a rainbow—a rainbow whose arch begins and ends, as rainbow arches do, uncertain where. And this blossoming in Infinity justifies itself. . . . How ? By the beauty of its smile. Therefore smile. Smile and be in harmony with—if not the spirit of the Universe (for the unknown looking down from the Hill of Heaven upon the Rainbow may for all we know smile also, and on the import of that smile opinion may be divided), and be in harmony at least with the beauty of that fragment of the Universe which, if we do not wholly comprehend, we can at least worship and imitate. . . . But you are yawning.”

“ No, obedient to you, I was—smiling.”

“ And for how long ? Until we are resolved—as the drops of the rainbow are resolved after refracting supernal colours. Yet as a raindrop glitters, ere it evaporate upon the flower and be again (who knows ?) drawn up in the immense cycle, with some reflection of the glory which its passage served to make, so should we maintain that smile to the moment of our dissolution. As indeed I, whose stormy aerial passage is nearly over, shall do till I attain to mine. For what commoner solace do we hear than that ‘ *he died with a smile upon his face* ’ ? Such a smile may each have at his passing ! How happy our friends will be to see it, how confounded our enemies ! How comforted, too, the philosophers, who will not fail to perceive in it the reflection of whatever faith they hold : the ineffable joy of one whose beatified wings even now mingle with the wings of other spirits in divine assumption ; the satisfaction of the racked, whom never again the torturers Joy and Sorrow will wake from endless sleep ; the profound irony of one who never expected his pleasures to last for ever ; and the disdain, too proud to curve itself in a full sneer, of one who opposes to the silent smile of the unknown a smile yet more silent ! ”

He paused.

“ I have been thinking,” said the Princess.

“ You wish to know more ? Shall I explain ? ”

“ No. It is unnecessary ; all this amounts to that you wish to marry me, and the announcement that you have earned the right to do so, but I should inform you that since you were last here a gentleman, who as a matter of fact once occupied a position menial enough but of importance in this household, has by signal honesty and perseverance arrived at a position where—well, in fact, to put it shortly, I have formed another attachment.”

“ Madam, am I reft of my senses ? You astonish me ! Who ? ”

“ The Executioner.”

“ Ah, heavens ! Well, let me inform you, madam, that I, too, have formed another attachment.”

“ You say that to my face ! How dare you ? But I saw directly you entered this room that you had long ago forgotten what true love is. Your long



absence from me bears it witness. Who, may I ask, is now the object of your affections ? ”

“ Do not smile—or smile, madam, if you can ; I love the Sphinx.”

He had but that moment discovered it.

The Princess shrieked and at the sound he bent upon her such a smile as in memory effectually prevented her ever mentioning the Sphinx and its secrets again to anyone.

Then he walked out.

## VII.

He returned to the Sphinx.

While yet afar off he was puzzled beholding a mountain range arisen in the wilderness. As he drew nearer he recognised it for the Sphinx. If during his thirty years' wanderings she had appeared to increase in size, to what dimensions had she not attained during his brief absence ! The vapours of the desert, rising about her, had collected upon her shoulders in a strata of billowy cloud, and her head, unimaginably exalted, had now reached such an altitude that the features were almost indistinguishable in the blaze of the sun.

Night had fallen by the time that he stood within the canyon of her breasts. For a little he rested his head upon the rock. A great weariness descended upon him. Physical infirmity, the inevitable sequel of all he had suffered in body and in soul, now made him its prey. His mind and spirit, however, remained keen and unquenchable as ever. He wrapped himself in his cloak and lay down. At midnight he awoke. For the first time the Sphinx, speaking in a voice of more than mortal tenderness, had made utterance without being addressed, “ Art thou returned, my lover ? ”

“ Thou seest me. All I love I have given thee.”

“ Few have bestowed upon me so much as thou. Fewer still have arrived where thou hast arrived, while yet possessing the eye not wholly dimmed and the tongue not altogether palsied. One thing, however, thou hast kept from me—the seal that is on thy heart.”

“ Ah, Sphinx,” replied Es-siddeeh, “ that I cannot give ; it is part of myself. Nor would I—for it was that which first brought me hither to scan thy face and to read thy riddle.”

“ I am a jealous lover.”

“ I know it. Yet what care I ? Thy jealousy is a measure of my reward ; for though I have discovered thy secret in general, yet it is a secret which no man perhaps will ever fathom in all particulars. Happy the hero who attains as far as I, happier yet he who can gaze unwinkingly upon thee as I do now, and hourly fathom something further ! ”

“ I am a jealous lover. Thou hast not much longer to gaze.”

“ No matter. Eyes do not perish with me, and for myself I am rewarded.”

Then was it that for Es-siddeeh the body and the face of the Sphinx achieved a final apotheosis. Her limbs throbbed with a deep and terrible

energy. From her breast issued an all embracing warmth similar to that of the earth. Her breathing became distinct as an august and stupendous rhythm resembling the ascent and descent of waters from firmament to firmament. Her cheeks flushed with a youthful elation. Into her eyes arose an immense light fixed upon unforetold futurities, and all her face, so worn and beautiful, became more ravaged and even more beautiful—for the very deepening scars, wasting and remoulding the features, gradually resolved the visage into an ethereal harmony hitherto unknown. Around her head, entangling in its mesh the nearer planets, there wreathed itself an enormous halo, iridescent as that which encircles the frosty moon. Her whole being exuded a supreme lustre until she became one living and colossal crystal which distributed in refraction all the colours of the rainbow and which palpitated with powers unguessed.

And to Es-siddeeh, who beheld her through the tears of one who momentarily expects to be parted, the spectra and the palpitation appeared in triple.

“O Sphinx, O Life the Enchantress,” he cried, “my true and only love, take if thou wilt my heart and the seal upon it, for thine am I only, thee only would I aid, thee only do I love, thee only would I worship!”

\* \* \* \* \*

A band of Arabs, journeying across the desert, found him, when dawn came, lying between the paws of the giant—dead, more cold than the stone which surrounded him and which now began to kindle in the morning rays. Though there had been no dew, his garments were deluged as with the falling of an immense tear. Upon his face there lingered a fixed smile, and, gazing upward, they beheld its double in the sunlit face of the familiar Sphinx.

HERE ENDS THE STORY OF THE SMILE OF THE SPHINX.

MAYEST THOU ALSO LEARN ITS SECRET.