

THE MARBLE SPHINX

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The Marble Sphinx by John Lucas

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JOHN LUCAS

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BY

ST. JOHN LUCAS

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1907

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I

It was the young Greek slave Alexis who had let fall the golden cup of his master, and the cup, falling on the marble floor, was dented in three places. Therefore two gigantic Nubians were ordered to strip the slave, and to beat him with leathern thongs that were studded with small bronze buttons. And when this was done, it seemed that Alexis was dead, for he was slender and delicate and very young. His master, therefore, bade the Nubians carry the bruised and naked body out of his sight; and they bore it a certain distance along the public highway, and flung it down where the road passes by a wood. Their lustrous black limbs and green turbans gleamed strangely in the fierce sunshine, so that all the birds that had been singing became mute at the same moment, and the zephyr held its breath. Soon they returned, chatter-

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ing one to the other like huge apes ; and Alexis lay like a broken flower beneath the ardour of the sun.

He lay there so quietly that the gentle, wild things of the woodland seemed to realize that he was only another victim of mankind their enemy, and after watching him from a hundred different fastnesses, they came out on the roadside, or stirred the leaves near his head. The rabbits played about his feet, the squirrels stared at him with their bright, bead-like eyes ; the soft-coated shrew-mice sat up on their haunches and nibbled the seeds of the long grasses which his hands had pressed down towards the earth. A saffron-hued butterfly hovered for a moment above his brow, almost touching him with its delicate wings ; and as it rose again in the heavy air it seemed as if it were his languid soul that soared in flight from those pale and breathless lips. The dim white anemones at the edge of the wood, the tall golden daffodils, and the beautiful dreamy-eyed narcissus, they too seemed to be watching him expectantly as he lay there. The petals of some daisies that grew where he was lying became dark with his blood.

Neither flower nor bird beheld any trace of life in him through the long, insufferable hours of the afternoon heat ; he remained in exactly the same attitude

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as when the Nubians had left him, lying on his side with his feet drawn up towards his body, his cheek pressed to the earth, and his open hands half hidden in the long grass. About an hour before sunset the fierce heat began to abate; a cool breeze heralded the dusk, and a shadow stole out from the wood and hid the scorched and scarred limbs of Alexis from the last level rays of the sun. The world gave a great sigh of relief; the animals, who had hidden themselves in the undergrowth, came forth and began once more to play in the road; the birds became garrulous, but their voices dwindled to an occasional soft cry when the serene beauty of twilight invaded the woodlands. The sun set in a wild splendour of scarlet and amber, and with the purple shadows that stole down from the hills came silence, and the silver crescent of the moon gleamed through the gaunt pines.

Yet Alexis did not stir. An owl, drifting noiselessly as an immense moth across the road, swerved as it caught sight of his body that gleamed like marble in the broadening moonlight, and the bats swooped down towards it, lured by the strange white thing that had troubled the loneliness of their dusky course. Soon all the stars came out; the calm unwavering planets, and the lesser lights that flickered as if some

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great wind was roaring across the fields of heaven. The Milky Way was like a mighty bridge of snow that spanned a deep purple abyss; and when a cloud dimmed its radiance for a moment it seemed as if the dusky form of some god had passed along that shining road. The great lamps of the north moved steadily towards the zenith. The sword of the hunter was vivid with light.

Alexis lay like a tired child on the calm breast of the earth.

II

It was nearly midnight when the sound of distant voices was borne along the road in the faint wind, and the murky orange glare from a multitude of torches came to trouble the pale radiance of the moonlight. As the noise came nearer, Alexis, if he had been conscious, would have perceived that it arose from a throng which conducted a huge ivory litter hung with curtains of Tyrian purple. Within the litter two figures reclined: the one a very corpulent old man with a flushed and hideous face, and a bald head that was crowned with roses; the other, a pale girl with lips of startling scarlet and strange painted eyelids. A golden lantern hung above them, illuminating the diaphanous rainbow-hued raiment of the woman, and the loose coils of flesh in the man's throat and neck. He was drinking tawny wine from a cup that Parrhasios himself had painted; and ever and again he caressed the white shoulders of the girl with his blotched and scaly hand; but she had turned from him