

The Mummy's Left Foot

Taken from a story by:
Theophile Gautier

It started out just like any other hot, summer day in the Paris of 1858. In an idle mood I had entered a dusty shop and the air inside hung like curtains with each bead a hard knot of dust that glimmered with the striking of each tiny sunbeam from the far window tossed high up against the ceiling. The sign outside on the door proclaimed this was one of those curiosity vendors who are called *_marchands de bric-a-brac_* in that peculiar Parisian *_argot_* which is so perfectly unintelligible elsewhere in France.

You have doubtless glanced occasionally through the windows of some of these shops yourself, stores that have become so numerous now that it is fashionable to buy antiquated furniture, and that every petty stock broker thinks he must have his *_chambre au moyen age_*.

There is one thing there which clings alike to the shop of the dealer in old iron, the ware-room of the tapestry maker, the laboratory of the chemist, and the studio of the painter: in all those gloomy dens where a furtive daylight filters in through the window-shutters the most manifestly ancient thing is dust. The cobwebs are more authentic than the guimp laces, and the old pear-tree furniture on exhibition is actually younger than the mahogany which arrived but yesterday from America.

The warehouse of my bric-a-brac dealer was a veritable Capharnaum. All ages and all nations seemed to have made their rendezvous there. An Etruscan lamp of red clay stood upon a Boule cabinet, with ebony panels, brightly striped by lines of inlaid brass; a duchess of the court of Louis XV. nonchalantly extended her fawn-like feet under a massive table of the time of Louis XIII., with heavy spiral supports of oak, and carven designs of chimeras and foliage intermingled.

Upon the denticulated shelves of several sideboards glittered immense Japanese dishes with red and blue designs relieved by gilded hatching, side by side with enamelled works by Bernard Palissy, representing serpents, frogs, and lizards in relief.

From disembowelled cabinets escaped cascades of silver-lustrous Chinese silks and waves of tinsels which an oblique sunbeam shot through with luminous beads; while

portraits of every era, in frames more or less tarnished, smiled through their yellow varnish.

The striped breastplate of a damascened suit of Milanese armour glittered in one corner; loves and nymphs of porcelain, Chinese grotesques, vases of _celadon_ and crackle-ware, Saxon and old Sevres cups encumbered the shelves and nooks of the apartment.

The dealer followed me closely through the tortuous way contrived between the piles of furniture, warding off with his hand the hazardous sweep of my coat-skirts, watching my elbows with the uneasy attention of an antiquarian and a usurer.

It was a singular face, that of the merchant; an immense skull, polished like a knee, and surrounded by a thin aureole of white hair, which brought out the clear salmon tint of his complexion all the more strikingly, lent him a false aspect of patriarchal _bonhomie_, counteracted, however, by the scintillation of two little yellow eyes which trembled in their orbits like two louis d'or upon quicksilver. The curve of his nose presented an aquiline silhouette, which suggested the Oriental or Jewish type. His hands--thin, slender, full of nerves which projected like strings upon the finger-board of a violin, and armed with claws like those on the terminations of bats' wings--shook with senile trembling; but those convulsively agitated hands became firmer than steel

pincers or lobsters' claws when they lifted any precious article--an onyx cup, a Venetian glass, or a dish of Bohemian crystal. This strange old man had an aspect so thoroughly rabbinical and cabalistic that he would have been burnt on the mere testimony of his face three centuries ago.

"Will you not buy something from me to-day, sir? Here is a Malay krees with a blade undulating like flame. Look at those grooves contrived for the blood to run along, those teeth set backward so as to tear out the entrails in withdrawing the weapon. It is a fine character of ferocious arm, and will look well in your collection. This two-handed sword is very beautiful. It is the work of Josepe de la Hera; and this *_colichemarde_*, with its fenestrated guard--what a superb specimen of handicraft!"

"No; I have quite enough weapons and instruments of carnage. I want a small figure, something which will suit me as a paper-weight, for I cannot endure those trumpery bronzes which the stationers sell, and which may be found on everybody's desk."

The old gnome foraged among his ancient wares, and finally arranged before me some antique bronzes, so-called at least; fragments of malachite, little Hindoo or Chinese idols, a kind of poussah-toys in jade-stone, representing the incarnations of Brahma or Vishnoo, and wonderfully

appropriate to the very undivine office of holding papers and letters in place.

I was hesitating between a porcelain dragon, all abundantly constellated with warts, its mouth made formidable with bristling tusks and four ranges of teeth, and over against it, an abominable little Mexican fetich, representing the god Vitziliputzili _au naturel_, but then, suddenly a spark of wheeling light twirled in a stream of dusty sun beams and I caught a gleam of sparkle on the ankle of a woman's charming foot. How can I describe that foot, or the impact it made upon me?

Every angle, every curve in it was perfect, perfect when I first looked upon that sweet left foot that I took for a fragment torn off of some antique Venus that had been shattered in some ancient earthquake, perhaps. Ah, but I was dreaming, as one does, you know, when the romance spirit rises up into the head and claims the soul.

The toes were a little long, and the big toe pointed to the outside. It was a lady's left foot and the ankle was narrow like a long distance runner's ankle. It had those beautiful ruddy and tawny tints that lend to Florentine bronze that warm living look so much preferable to the gray-green aspect of common bronzes, which might easily be mistaken for statues in a state of putrefaction.

Satiny gleams played over its rounded forms, doubtless polished by the amorous kisses of twenty centuries of lovers growing old while Venus waxed yet young, for it seemed to me to be a Corinthian bronze, a work of the best era of art, perhaps it had been moulded by Lysippus himself.

"That left foot will be my choice," I said to the merchant. His gaze turned sharply upon me and he studied me as if in surprise that I should even be interested. His gaze mellowed slowly and the merchant assumed an ironical and saturnine air, as he first hefted the foot for a long moment, then held out the object I desired that I might examine it more fully.

I was surprised first at its lightness. It was not a foot of metal, but in sooth a foot of flesh and bone, an embalmed foot if you will, a mummy's left foot. I turned it over and studied the swirls on the bottom of the foot, so realistic, so sharp and clear. On closer examination it revealed ever more closely the very grain of the skin, and the almost imperceptible lines impressed upon it by the texture of the bandages, became perceptible beneath my hand. The toes were long, as I said, slender they were and quite delicate. They were terminated by perfectly formed nails, pure and transparent as agates. The great toe, slightly separated from the rest, afforded a happy contrast, in the antique style, to the position of the other toes, and lent it an aerial lightness-- the grace of a hawk's foot that reaches out

to clutch the falling prey. The sole of the foot was scarcely streaked by a few almost imperceptible cross lines that afforded ample evidence that it had never once touched the hard bare ground, and had only come in contact with the finest matting of Nile rushes and the softest carpets of panther skin.

My fancied reverie was broken by the raucous laughter of the merchant. "Ha, ha, you want to acquire the sweet left foot of the immortal Princess Hermonthis!"

A strange giggle gurgled in his throat as he throttled back further words bid stayed. He fixed his wide owlish eyes upon me. "Ha, ha, ha! You want it for a paper-weight! What an original idea! -- an artistic idea in a realm all its own! Old Pharaoh would certainly have been shocked had some one whispered to him that the left foot of his adored daughter would someday be used for a paper-weight after he had had a mountain of granite hollowed out as a receptacle for the triple coffin, painted by the best artists in the land, and then gilded it and lavished it with hieroglyphic instructions and carved beautiful bas-relief paintings of the fast approaching Judgment of Souls ceremony held at the last of the latter days." His mouth turned up, a soft sneer turning his eyes to narrow daggers as the little merchant, mumbled words I could only half hear, as though he were talking only to himself.

"How much will you charge me for this orphaned fragment of mummy?" I demanded shortly.

"Ah, I want the highest price I can get, for it is, after all, a superb piece even for a paper weight. If I had the match of it you could not have either one for less than five hundred francs. What you see here is the left foot of the only daughter of an aging, doting Pharaoh! Nothing is more rare."

"Assuredly this is not a common article, but still, how much do you want? Wait. In the first place let me warn you that all my wealth consists of just five louis. I can buy anything that costs five louis or less, but I can buy nothing dearer. Here," I offered him the lapel of my coat, "You might search my vest pockets and most secret drawers of my trousers without even finding one poor five-franc piece more."

"Five louis for the foot of the Princess Hermonthis!" He began that weird chuckle again, and throttled it down so hard that tears sprang from his eyes. Then he chuckled again, controlled, fake.

"That is very little, very little indeed. Note you. 'Tis an authentic foot," muttered the merchant, shaking his head, and imparting a peculiar rotary motion to his eyes. "Well, if that is all it is worth to you, take it, have it -- and I will give you the bandages into the bargain," he added, wrapping the foot in an ancient damask rag. "Very fine! See? Real

damask--Indian damask which has never been redyed. It is strong, and yet it is soft." He paused and glanced up at me as his stubby fingers stroked the frayed tissue through the trade-acquired habit which moved him to praise even an object of such little value that he himself deemed it only worth five louis.

He passed the package into my hand, letting it drop the last half inch so that my hand and his never touched. His eerie chuckle belched out once more.. "The foot of the Princess Hermonthis to be used for a paper-weight!"

He turned away for a moment to blink into the darkness. Then turning the full power of his phosphorescent eyes upon me, he exclaimed in a voice strident as the crying of a cat which has swallowed a fish-bone:

"Old Pharaoh will not be well pleased. He loved his daughter, the dear man!"

His words incensed me and I struck back. "You speak as if you were a contemporary of his. You are old enough, goodness knows! but you do not date back to the Pyramids of Egypt," I lunged swiftly from the threshold of his dusty store.

At the corner I still felt the weight of his eyes stabbing into my back and I paused, then glanced back. He was turned, locking the door, but glancing my way, and his laughter was like frozen drips from a

winter's slanted house beam.

I shrugged my shoulders as I cast the little man from my thoughts and went home, thoroughly delighted with my acquisition.

I wanted to justify my purchase as soon as possible, so I mockingly placed the foot of the divine Princess Hermonthis upon a heap of papers scribbled over with verses, that were in themselves an undecipherable mosaic work of erasures; articles freshly begun; letters forgotten, and posted in the table drawer instead of the letter-box, an error to which absent-minded people are peculiarly liable. But when I stood back the mockery died from my lips and eyes. The effect of having that mummy's left foot in my room was charming – yes, charming, bizarre, -- and somehow romantic, as if I had discovered a long hidden foot fetish.

A pleased smile came to my lips. Well satisfied with this embellishment, I went out of the room with all the gravity and pride becoming one who feels that he has the ineffable advantage over all the passers-by whom he elbows, of possessing even a lowly piece of the Princess Hermonthis, daughter of Pharaoh.

I looked upon all who did not possess, like myself, a paper-weight so authentically Egyptian as very ridiculously handicapped people, and it seemed to me that the proper occupation of every sensible man should consist in the mere fact of having a royal

mummy's keen left foot upon his desk.

Happily I met some friends, whose presence distracted me in my infatuation with this new acquisition. I went to dinner with them, for I could not very well have dined with myself.

When I came back that evening, with my brain slightly confused by a few glasses of wine, a vague whiff of Oriental perfume delicately titillated my olfactory nerves. The heat of the room had warmed the natron, bitumen, and myrrh in which the _paraschistes_, who cut open the bodies of the dead, had bathed the corpse of the princess. It was a perfume at once sweet and penetrating, a perfume that four thousand years had not been able to dissipate.

But, was it not somehow fitting? The Dream of Egypt is Eternity. Her odours have the solidity of granite to endure as long.

I soon drank deeply from the thick black cup of sleep. For a few hours all remained opaque to me. Oblivion and nothingness inundated me with their sombre waves.

Yet light gradually dawned upon the darkness of my mind. Dreams commenced to touch me softly, flitting on in their silent flight.

The eyes of my spirit were opened, and I beheld my chamber as it actually was. I

might have believed myself awake but for a vague consciousness of opacity in my form which assured me that I slept, and that something fantastical was about to take place.

The odour of the myrrh had somehow augmented in intensity, and I felt a slight headache, which I very naturally attributed to several glasses of champagne that we had drunk to the unknown gods and our future fortunes.

I peered through my room with a feeling of expectation, which I saw nothing to justify. Every article of furniture was in its proper place. The lamp, softly shaded by its globe of ground crystal, burned upon its bracket; the water-colour sketches shone under their Bohemian glass; the curtains hung down languidly; everything wore an aspect of tranquil slumber.

After a few moments, however, all this calm interior appeared to become faintly disturbed, as if a film of ancient dust were being lifted. The woodwork cracked stealthily, the ash-covered log suddenly emitted a jet of blue flame, and the disks of the pateras seemed like great metallic eyes, watching, like myself, for the things which were about to happen. I remarked to myself how penetrating our fancies could be when we let them loose to fly.

But then, my gaze accidentally fell upon the desk where I had placed the foot of the Princess Hermonthis.

Instead of remaining quiet, as behooved a foot which had been embalmed for four thousand years, it commenced to lift and strain as if to detach itself from the pull of gravity and altogether to act in a nervous manner, jittery manner as it contracted itself. I jumped back when the foot leaped over the papers like a startled frog. How weird that it had suddenly jerked like that as if it had been stabbed with the prong of a galvanic battery. I could distinctly hear the dry sound made by foot's little heel, hard it was, sharp too, as the hoof of a gazelle on the hot baked African plain.

I became rather discontented with my acquisition, inasmuch as I had wished my paper-weights to be of a sedentary disposition, and no matter how I looked at it, there was something very unnatural that even mummified feet should walk about without legs, then my dreamy state was pierced with a feeling quite closely akin to fear.

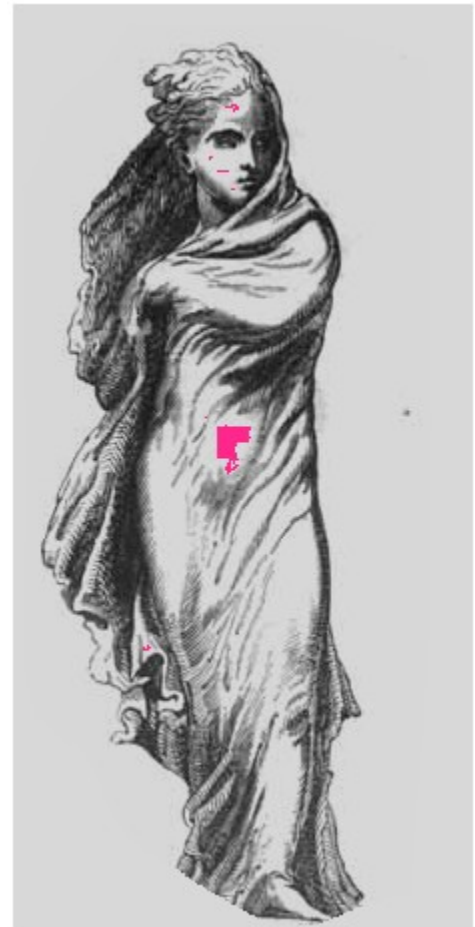
Eerily, the folds of my bed-curtain began to stir, and again I heard a bumping sound, like that caused by some person hopping on one foot across the floor. I must confess that even knowing that I slept, I became alternately hot and cold, that then I felt a strange wind chill trickling like bitter water down my back, and that when my hair

stood suddenly on end my night-cap executed a leap of several yards.

At that point when my teeth were biting almost clean through my tongue, the bed-curtains sifted opened and there, right before me I beheld the strangest figure imaginable.

Sleep fled from my dream. Pretending that I slept was no longer an option for here was a young girl of a very deep coffee-brown complexion, like the bayadere Amani, and she possessed the most flawless form of pure early Egyptian beauty. Her soft eyes were almond-shaped and oblique, with eyebrows tucked sharp and so black that they seemed blue; her nose was exquisitely chiselled, almost Greek in its delicacy of outline; and she might indeed have been taken for a Corinthian statue of bronze but for the prominence of her cheekbones and the slightly African fulness of her lips, which compelled one to recognize her as belonging beyond all doubt to the hieroglyphic race which dwelt upon the banks of the Nile.

Her arms, slender and spindle-shaped like those of very young girls, were encircled by a peculiar kind of metal bands and bracelets of glass beads; her hair was all twisted into little cords, and she wore upon her bosom a little idol-figure of green paste, bearing a whip with seven lashes, which proved it to be an image of Isis; her brow was adorned



with a shining plate of gold, and a few traces of paint relieved the coppery tint of her cheeks.

As for her costume, it was very odd indeed.

Fancy a *_pagne_*, or skirt, all formed of little strips of material bedizened with blood red and black hieroglyphics, stiffened with bitumen, and apparently belonging to a freshly unbandaged mummy.

In one of those sudden flights of thought so common in dreams I heard the hoarse falsetto of the bric-a-brac dealer, repeating like a monotonous refrain the phrase he had uttered in his shop with so enigmatical an intonation:

"Old Pharaoh will not be well pleased. He loved his daughter, the dear man!"

One strange circumstance, which was not at all calculated to restore my equanimity, was that the apparition had but one foot; the other was broken off at the ankle!

She approached the table where the foot was starting and fidgeting about more than ever, and there supported herself upon the edge of the desk. I saw her eyes fill with pearly gleaming tears.

Although she had not as yet spoken, I fully comprehended the thoughts which agitated her. She looked at her foot--for it was indeed her own--with an exquisitely graceful

expression of coquettish sadness, but the foot leaped and ran hither and thither, as though impelled on steel springs.

Twice or thrice she extended her hand to seize it, but could not succeed.

Then commenced between the Princess Hermonthis and her foot--which appeared to be endowed with a special life of its own--a very fantastic dialogue in a most ancient Coptic tongue, such as might have been spoken thirty centuries ago in the syrxes of the land of Ser. Luckily I understood Coptic perfectly well that night.

The Princess Hermonthis cried, in a voice sweet and vibrant as the tones of a crystal bell:

"Well, my dear little foot, you always flee from me, yet I always took good care of you. I bathed you with perfumed water in a bowl of alabaster; I smoothed your heel with pumice-stone mixed with palm oil; your nails were cut with golden scissors and polished with a hippopotamus tooth; I was careful to select _tatbebs_ for you, painted and embroidered and turned up at the toes, which were the envy of all the young girls in Egypt. You wore on your great toe rings bearing the device of the sacred Scarabaeus, and you supported one of the lightest bodies that a lazy foot could sustain."

The foot replied in a pouting and chagrined tone:

"You know well that I do not belong to myself any longer. I have been bought and paid for. The old merchant knew what he was about. He bore you a grudge for having refused to espouse him. This is an ill turn which he has done you. The Arab who violated your royal coffin in the subterranean pits of the necropolis of Thebes was sent thither by him. He desired to prevent you from being present at the reunion of the shadowy nations in the cities below. Have you five pieces of gold for my ransom?"

"Alas, no! My jewels, my rings, my purses of gold and silver were all stolen from me," answered the Princess Hermonthis, with a sob.

"Princess," I then exclaimed, "I never retained anybody's foot unjustly. Even though you have not got the five louis which it cost me, I present it to you gladly. I should feel unutterably wretched to think that I were the cause of so amiable a person as the Princess Hermonthis being lame."

I delivered this discourse in a royally gallant, troubadour tone which must have astonished the beautiful Egyptian girl.

She turned a look of deepest gratitude upon me, and her eyes shone with bluish gleams of light.

She took her foot, which surrendered itself willingly this time, like a woman about to put on her little shoe, and adjusted it to her leg with much skill.

This operation over, she took a few steps about the room, as though to assure herself that she was really no longer lame.

"Ah, how pleased my father will be! He who was so unhappy because of my mutilation, and who from the moment of my birth set a whole nation at work to hollow me out a tomb so deep that he might preserve me intact until that last day, when souls must be weighed in the balance of Amenthi! Come with me to my father. He will receive you kindly, for you have given me back my own left foot."

Perhaps a vestige of sleep still slumbered in my poor brain for I thought this proposition natural enough. I arrayed myself in a dressing-gown of large-flowered pattern, which lent me a very Pharaonic aspect, hurriedly put on a pair of Turkish slippers, and informed the Princess Hermonthis that I was ready to follow her.

Before starting, Hermonthis took from her neck the little idol of green paste, and laid it on the scattered sheets of paper which covered the table.

"It is only fair," she observed, smilingly,
"that I should replace your paper-weight."

She gave me her hand, which felt soft and cold, like the brushed skin of a serpent, and we departed.

We passed for some time with the velocity of an arrow through a fluid and grayish expanse, in which half-formed silhouettes flitted swiftly by us, to right and left.

For an instant we saw only sky and sea.

A few moments later obelisks commenced to tower in the distance; pylons and vast flights of steps guarded by sphinxes became clearly outlined against the horizon.

We had reached our destination.

The princess conducted me to a mountain of rose-coloured granite, in the face of which appeared an opening so narrow and low that it would have been difficult to distinguish it from the fissures in the rock, had not its location been marked by two stelae wrought with sculptures.

Hermonthis kindled a torch and led the way before me.

We traversed corridors hewn through the living rock. These walls covered with hieroglyphics and paintings of allegorical processions, might well have occupied thousands of arms for thousands of years in

their formation. These corridors of interminable length opened into square chambers, in the midst of which pits had been contrived, through which we descended by cramp-irons or spiral stairways. These pits again conducted us into other chambers, opening into other corridors, likewise decorated with painted sparrow-hawks, serpents coiled in circles, the symbols of the _tau_ and _pedum_--prodigious works of art which no living eye can ever examine--interminable legends of granite which only the dead have time to read through all eternity.

At last we found ourselves in a hall so vast, so enormous, so immeasurable, that the eye could not reach its limits. Files of monstrous columns stretched far out of sight on every side, between which twinkled livid stars of yellowish flame; points of light which revealed further depths incalculable in the darkness beyond.

The Princess Hermonthis still held my hand, and graciously saluted the mummies of her acquaintance.

My eyes became accustomed to the dim twilight, and objects became discernible.

I beheld the kings of the subterranean races seated upon thrones--grand old men, though dry, withered, wrinkled like parchment, and blackened with naphtha and bitumen--all wearing _pshents_ of gold, and breast-plates and gorgets glittering with

precious stones, their eyes immovably fixed like the eyes of sphinxes, and their long beards whitened by the snow of centuries. Behind them stood their peoples, in the stiff and constrained posture enjoined by Egyptian art, all eternally preserving the attitude prescribed by the hieratic code. Behind these nations, the cats, ibixes, and crocodiles contemporary with them-- rendered monstrous of aspect by their swathing bands--mewed, flapped their wings, or extended their jaws in a saurian giggle.

All the Pharaohs were there--Cheops, Chephrenes, Psammetichus, Sesostris, Amenotaph--all the dark rulers of the pyramids and syrinxes. On yet higher thrones sat Chronos and Xixouthros, who was contemporary with the deluge, and Tubal Cain, who had reigned before it.

The beard of King Xixouthros had grown seven times around the granite table, upon which he leaned, lost in deep reverie, and buried in dreams.

Farther back, through a dusty cloud, I beheld dimly the seventy-two preadamite kings, with their seventy-two peoples, forever passed away.

After permitting me to gaze upon this bewildering spectacle a few moments, the Princess Hermonthis presented me to her father Pharaoh, who favoured me with a most gracious nod.

"I have found my foot again! I have found my foot!" cried the princess, clapping her little hands together with every sign of frantic joy. "It was this gentleman who restored it to me."

The races of Kemi, the races of Nahasi--all the black, bronzed, and copper-coloured nations repeated in chorus:

"The Princess Hermonthis has found her foot again!"

Even Xixouthros himself was visibly affected.

He raised his heavy eyelids, stroked his moustache with his fingers, and turned upon me a glance weighty with centuries.

"By Oms, the dog of Hell, and Tmei, daughter of the Sun and of Truth, this is a brave and worthy lad!" exclaimed Pharaoh, pointing to me with his sceptre, which was terminated with a lotus-flower.

"What recompense do you desire?"

Filled with that daring inspired by dreams in which nothing seems impossible, I asked him for the hand of the Princess Hermonthis. The hand seemed to me a very proper antithetic recompense for the foot.

Pharaoh opened wide his great eyes of glass in astonishment at my witty request.

"What country do you come from, what is your age?"

"I am a Frenchman, and I am twenty-seven years old, venerable Pharaoh."

"Twenty-seven years old, and he wishes to espouse the Princess Hermonthis who is thirty centuries old!" cried out at once all the Thrones and all the Circles of Nations.

Only Hermonthis herself did not seem to think my request unreasonable.

"If you were even only two thousand years old," replied the ancient king, "I would willingly give you the princess, but the disproportion is too great; and, besides, we must give our daughters husbands who will last well. You do not know how to preserve yourselves any longer. Even those who died only fifteen centuries ago are already no more than a handful of dust. Behold, my flesh is solid as basalt, my bones are bones of steel!

"I will be present on the last day of the world with the same body and the same features which I had during my lifetime. My daughter Hermonthis will last longer than a statue of bronze.

"Then the last particles of your dust will have been scattered abroad by the winds, and even Isis herself, who was able to find the atoms of Osiris, would scarce be able to recompense your being.

"See how vigorous I yet remain, and how mighty is my grasp," he added, shaking my hand in the English fashion with a strength that buried my rings in the flesh of my fingers.

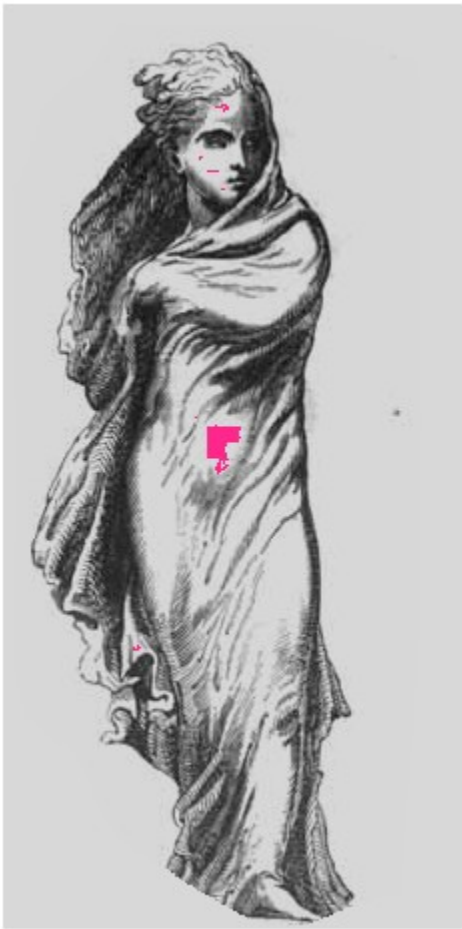
He squeezed me so hard that I awoke, and found my friend Alfred shaking me by the arm to make me get up.

"Oh, you everlasting sleeper! Must I have you carried out into the middle of the street, and fireworks exploded in your ears? It is afternoon. Don't you recollect your promise to take me with you to see M. Aguado's Spanish pictures?"

"My eyes, OPEN! I forgot all, all about it," I murmured, dressing myself hurriedly. "We will go there at once. I have the permit lying there on my desk."

I started to search for it, but my purpose was swept aside when I beheld the absence of the mummy's left foot that I had purchased only the evening before. In its place was the little green paste idol bearing a whip with seven lashes, which had proved it to be an image of Isis, the very one left to me in my silken dream by the Right Royal Princess, Hermonthis!

"Good Heavens," Alfred exclaimed in astonishment as he peered at me. "You look as if you've just seen a ghost."



"No," I sadly replied. Even in my own ears my voice wailed thin, flat and forlorn. "No, there is no ghost in here." Oh. Perhaps, if he had not woken me so awfully soon?

the end



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