

THE GREEN MUMMY

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Chapter I. The Lovers

"I am very angry," pouted the maid.

"In heaven's name, why?" questioned the bachelor.

"You have, so to speak, bought me."

"Impossible: your price is prohibitive."

"Indeed, when a thousand pounds—"

"You are worth fifty and a hundred times as much. Pooh!"

"That interjection doesn't answer my question."

"I don't think it is one which needs answering," said the young man lightly; "there are more important things to talk about than pounds, shillings, and sordid pence."

"Oh, indeed! Such as—"

"Love, on a day such as this is. Look at the sky, blue as your eyes; at the sunshine, golden as your hair:"

"Warm as your affection, you should say."

"Affection! So cold a word, when I love you."

"To the extent of one thousand pounds."

"Lucy, you are a woman. That money did not

buy your love, but the consent of your step-father to our marriage. Had I not humored his whim, he would have insisted upon your marrying Random."

Lucy pouted again and in scorn.

"As if I ever would," said she.

"Well, I don't know. Random is a soldier and a baronet; handsome and agreeable, with a certain amount of talent. What objection can you find to such a match?"

"One insuperable objection; he isn't you, Archie—darling."

"H'm, the adjective appears to be an afterthought," grumbled the bachelor; then, when she merely laughed teasingly after the manner of women, he added moodily:

"No, by Jove, Random isn't me, by any manner of means. I am but a poor artist without fame or position, struggling on three hundred a year for a grudging recognition."

"Quite enough for one, you greedy creature."

"And for two?" he inquired softly.

"More than enough."

"Oh, nonsense, nonsense, nonsense!"

"What! when I am engaged to you? Actions speak much louder than remarks, Mr. Archibald Hope. I love you more than I do money."

"Angel! angel!"

"You said that I was a woman just now. What do, you mean?"

"This," and he kissed her willing lips in the lane, which was empty save for blackbirds and beetles. "Is any explanation a clear one?"

"Not to an angel, who requires adoration, but to a woman who—Let us walk on, Archie, or we shall be late for dinner."

The young man smiled and frowned and sighed and laughed in the space of thirty seconds—something of a feat in the way of emotional gymnastics. The freakish feminine nature perplexed him as it had perplexed Adam, and he could not understand this rapid change from poetry to prose. How could it be otherwise, when he was but five-and-twenty, and engaged for the first time? Threescore years and ten is all too short a time to learn what woman really is, and every student leaves this world with the conviction that of the thousand sides which the female of man presents to the male of woman, not one reveals the being he desires to know. There is always a deep below a deep; a veil behind a veil, a sphere within a sphere.

"It's most remarkable," said the puzzled man in this instance.

"What is?" asked the enigma promptly.

To avoid an argument which he could not sustain, Archie switched his on to the weather.

"This day in September; one could well believe that it is still the month of roses."

"What! With those wilted hedges and falling leaves and reaped fields and golden haystacks, and-and—"

She glanced around for further illustrations in the way of contradiction.

"I can see all those things, dear; and the misplaced day also!"

"Misplaced?"

"July day slipped into September. It comes into the landscape of this autumn month, as does love into the hearts of an elderly couple who feel too late the supreme passion."

Lucy's eyes swept the prospect, and the spring-like sunshine, revealing all too clearly the wrinkles of aging Nature, assisted her comprehension.

"I understand. Yet youth has its wisdom."

"And old age its experience. The law of compensation, my dearest. But I don't see," he added reflectively, "what your remark and my answer have to do with the view," whereat Lucy declared that his wits wandered.

Within the last five minutes they had emerged from a sunken lane where the hedges were white with dust and dry with heat to a vast open space, apparently at the World's-End. Here the saltings spread raggedly towards the stately stream of the Thames, intersected