

LUMEN

Max Leonard Hitchings
(excerpt)

In this most vivid of imaginings, I was walking in the dark streets of London with Thomas Wilkinson, a friend from university. Having visited only twice before and on those occasions only truly seen Trafalgar Square and some large lecture halls, to dream of London is rare.

Thomas took me down some squalid alleyway where it appeared several book sellers operated, then into one of his choosing before I could see its name.

We went through the shop area into the back, where several Arab men sat smoking grand, colourful hookahs.

“Thomas,” I said, “This is an opium den.”

Thomas replied,

“It isn’t opium they’re smoking. It’s hashish”.

One of the men took a small grey-black block out of his turban. He leaned towards me.

“Spider hashish.” he said, thrusting the cube into my face. I saw that it was made of maybe a hundred compressed spiders. I retched. The man in the turban grimaced.

Thomas led me through the men, many of whom lay prostrate on the dirty floor. We saw a man being carried out by four others, his body utterly rigid.

“Look,” said Thomas, “the spiders have consumed him.”

When we reached the back of the room we found a doorway covered with a blue beaded curtain, behind which sat a woman. I could just see her bare feet underneath.

“Thomas,” I protested, “I do not believe in fortune telling! What will she do, gaze into her crystal ball and tell me I’ll die an unhappy man? And charge me money for it? I could tell you that free of charge!”

Thomas drew back the curtain.

I recognised the woman. Her face was not old, but worn in

a way that suggested timelessness. I couldn't decide where from, but I knew her. I was sure I knew her. She might have been some distant relative I had glimpsed at a large family gathering. But she felt... close somehow. I couldn't put my finger on it.

Then Thomas said,

"This woman is not going to read your fortune. She is going to read your novel."

My novel, I thought, but I haven't written a novel. Occasionally I write silly stories, but I've never shown them to anybody.

"Sit down," said the woman, and I did. Thomas drew the curtain. He left me in there with her! She reached into a satin bag and retrieved an emerald green snake. I started, and moved to get up from my chair.

"Sit!" said the woman, sternly but not aggressively. "It will not bite you. It has no teeth, see?"

She showed me the snake's open mouth, and true to her word, it had not a single fang.

She laid it on the table.

"Now," she said, "put your hand in its mouth."

I hesitated at first, but this woman fixed her eyes on mine, and I felt compelled to do as she insisted. I lifted my hand.

"No." said the woman, "your other hand. Your writing hand."

I lifted my right hand, and, pushing my thumb and fingers together in a way similar to how one holds a pen, I squirmed my hand into the cold mouth.

"Good." Said the woman.

Then she closed her eyes and put the snake's tail in her own blackened, toothless gums.