

The Dancer

A short story by Maggie Handsley

She wove her path between the diners, enticing them into her web. The companionable clatter of cutlery, chinking of drinks, the casual chatter died away. The only sound was the steady heartbeat of the drum.

'She's just back from Cairo,' said Howard. 'They say she's one of the best.' Dr. Ahmet leaned back in his chair, sipping his cigar. He had the well-oiled look of a man used to the finer things in life.

Howard tried to relax. He had wondered about the *Winter Palace* restaurant. Would it please an expert in the Government Department of Antiquities? Howard desperately needed his influence if he was going to make a success of setting up a new Armana gallery in the City Museum. However, Dr. Ahmet had eaten with relish and now his expression was taking on a heavy glow of anticipation as his eyes followed the dancer.

Yasmeen was mesmerising. Her lush round flesh undulated, shivering in subtle waves, enhanced by the shimmering droplets dancing round her hips. With a flick here, a glance there, a tiny gesture of the hand, she controlled the rhythm and pace of the drum. The musician, taking his cue, provided a seamless accompaniment to the dance.

Dr. Ahmet, ignoring his whisky, was savouring each move. Howard began to breathe more easily and allowed his gaze to follow that of everyone else in the room. Yasmeen was reaching the end of her improvisation. The drumming ceased and, to the delicate ring of the zilla, she performed her speciality. With her body gracefully poised and perfectly still, she then allowed a series of delicate ripples to spread across one hip into her belly in a tremulous cascade of shimmering sequins. Howard caught his breath. Dr. Ahmet stopped breathing altogether. A moment's silence while the last minute ripple dies away then, to a burst of recorded music, Yasmeen plunged herself into a dazzling routine that made her hips appear to have a life of their own. The atmosphere pulsed. The most dedicated diner, the most reluctant spectator burst into applause. At the end, Yasmeen smiled and blew grateful kisses to her audience. Howard reached out to catch one, then thought better of it. She melted gracefully away, leaving a wave of desire behind. The applause continued hopefully but she did not reappear.

Dr. Ahmet leaned across the table.

'I would like to meet her,' he said. 'Why don't you ask her to join us?' Howard opened his mouth but nothing came out. His thoughts were swimming. What was he thinking? Where did he think he was? Could he possibly think she could be bought?

Dr. Ahmet lost patience and summoned the waiter himself. The waiter, a professional gentleman, maintained a calm and pleasant manner whilst explaining that the guest artiste would have left by now as she had a further engagement that evening. Dr, Ahmet looked at Howard with an expression that left him with little hope of support for the Armana gallery.

Howard excused himself and hurried out into the street. There she was, emerging from the staff door, laden with bulging carrier bags.

'Excuse me, Yasmeen!' His voice jumped out of his throat like a frog. She looked up at him and smiled. He didn't know what to say.

'Call me Dore.'

'What?'

'Short for Doreen. Doreen Broadbent. How d'you do?' She dropped a bag and stuck out her hand. At this close distance, in the streetlight, Howard noticed her over bright make-up, the heavy base coat and the lipstick leaking round the edges. She was forty if she was a day.

'I just wanted to say,' he said, 'how marvellous you are.' Particularly now that... er, I've met you.'

'Ta very much,' she said, flashing a smile over her shoulder as she stepped out into the determined drizzle of a Leeds November night.