

THE SERPENT'S TALE

by LEONID ANDREYEV

adapted for the stage by WALTER WYKES

CHARACTERS

A WOMAN

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THE SERPENT'S TALE

[A WOMAN sways rhythmically. Her eyes closed, she seems to be aware of nothing but the hypnotic movement of her own body. She is terribly beautiful.]

[After a few moments, her eyes flash open, and a half-smile creeps across her face. She places a finger gently to her lips.]

WOMAN

Shhh! Shhh! Shhh! Come closer. Look into my eyes!

I always was a fascinating creature, you know. Tender, sensitive, thoughtful. I was wise beyond my years. And so flexible in the writhing of my graceful body. It will give you pleasure to watch me dance—will it not? Shall I dance for you? Shall I coil up into a ring? Shall I flash my scales and wind myself around? Shall I clasp you to my steel body in a gentle, cold embrace? One of many! One of many!

Shhh! Shhh! Look into my eyes!

Why do you look away? Don't you like my writhing and my straight, piercing gaze? Oh, my head is heavy—therefore I sway quietly. My head is heavy—therefore I gaze straight ahead as I sway. Come closer. I want to feel your warmth. That's right—stroke my wise forehead with your fingers; in its fine outlines you will find the form of a cup into which flows knowledge, the dew of the evening-flowers. When I stir the air by my writhing, a trace is left in it—the design of the finest of webs, the web of dream-charms, the enchantment of noiseless movements, the inaudible hiss of gliding lines. I am silent and I sway myself. I look ahead and I sway. What is this strange burden I carry on my neck?

I love you.

I always was a fascinating creature, and those that I loved were loved tenderly and truly. Come closer. Come. Do you see my teeth? My white, sharp, enchanting little teeth? I used to bite when I kissed, you know. Not painfully, no—just a nibble. A tender caress. I would bite until the first bright drops of blood appeared, until a cry came forth which sounded like the tinkling of a bell. It was very pleasant—do not think otherwise; if my little bite was unwelcome, those whom I kissed would not have come back for more—would they? And they did come back! They came as if drawn by some irresistible force—by the pull of the moon! They could not help themselves! And I kissed them many times! It is only now that I can kiss but once—how sad—only once! One kiss for each—how little that is for a loving heart, for a sensitive soul, striving for a perfect union! But it is only I, the sad one, who kiss but once, and must seek love again—my lover knows no other love after mine: to him my one, tender, nuptial kiss is binding and

eternal. I will not deceive you. Be patient, and when my story is ended—I will kiss you too.

I love you.

Look into my eyes. Is it not true that my eyes are magnificent and enchanting? Have you ever seen such a firm look, a straight look? It is steadfast, like steel forced against your heart. I look ahead and sway myself, I look and I enchant; in my green eyes I gather your fear, your loving, fatigued, submissive longing. Come closer. I am a queen now and you cannot fail to see my beauty; but there was a time once—ah, what a strange time! The thought of it troubles me—what a strange and confusing time! No one loved me. No one worshipped me. I was persecuted with such cruelty, trampled in the mud and jeered—Ah, what a strange time it was! One of many! One of many!

I told you to come closer—did I not?

Why did they not love me? Was I not a fascinating creature then, as I am now? Only then I lacked malice; I was gentle and kind-hearted, and I danced wonderfully. But they tortured me. They burnt me with fire. Those heavy, coarse beasts trampled upon me ... their terrible weight pressing down ... cold tusks and bloody mouths tore my tender body—and in my powerless sorrow I bit the sand, I swallowed the dust of the ground—I nearly died of despair. I was near death every day, crushed. Every day I was dying of despair. Oh, what a terrible time it was! Do you not pity me? The stupid forest has forgotten everything—it does not remember that time, but I remember. Come closer. Comfort me—me, the offended, the sad one, the loving one who dances so beautifully.

I love you.

You understand me—do you not? You alone? How was I to defend myself? I had only my white, wonderful, sharp little teeth—they were good only for kisses. How could I defend myself from those terrible beasts? It is only now that I carry on my neck this terrible burden of a head, and my look is commanding and straight, but then my head was light and my eyes gazed meekly. Then I had not yet any poison. Oh, my head is so heavy, it is hard for me to hold it up! I have grown tired of my look—two stones are in my forehead, and these are my eyes. Perhaps the glittering stones are precious—but it is hard to carry them instead of gentle eyes—they oppress my brain. It is so hard for my head! I look ahead and sway myself; I see you in a green mist—you are so far away. Come closer—come and brace me up. You are very strong—are you not? Come and show me your strength. I am trembling.

You see, even in sorrow I am beautiful. I am only weak because of love. Look into my pupil; I will narrow and widen it, and give it a peculiar glitter—the twinkling of a star at night, the playfulness of all precious stones—of diamonds, of green emeralds, of yellowish topaz, of blood-red rubies. Look into my eyes: It is I, the queen—I am crowning myself, and that which is glittering, burning and glowing—that robs you of

your reason, your freedom and your life—it is poison. It is a drop of my venom. But I warned you—did I not?

How has this happened? I cannot say. I bear you no ill-will—you nor the others. One of many!

I lived and suffered. I was silent. I languished. I hid myself when I could; I crawled away hastily. But they pursued me without mercy—until I could no longer weep, they pursued me! I, who wept such great tears, such wonderful tears of passion—I cannot weep; and my easy dance grew ever faster and ever more beautiful. Alone in the stillness, alone in the thicket, I danced with sorrow in my heart—they despised my swift dance and would have killed me if they could. Suddenly my head began to grow heavy ... how strange it is! My head grew heavy, just as small and beautiful, just as wise and beautiful, it had suddenly grown terribly heavy; it bent my neck to the ground, and hurt my delicate body. Now I am somewhat used to it, but at first it was dreadfully awkward and painful. I thought I was going to die. But I did not die.

And suddenly ... come closer now ... look into my eyes. Shhh! Shhh! Shhh!

And suddenly my look became heavy—it became fixed and strange—even I was frightened! I was frightened of myself! I wanted to turn and glance away—but I could not. I could only look straight ahead, as I do now—I could only pierce with my eyes ever more deeply; I was petrified—look into my eyes—just as everything I look upon becomes petrified. Look into my eyes.

I love you. Do not laugh at my story. If you do, I shall be cross. I shall not give myself to you. And I want to open my heart, my sensitive heart, I want to share with you everything, my whole being, my essence! I want you to understand my suffering. I want a consort, an equal, a perfect union ... but it is not possible. All my efforts are in vain—I am alone. I will always be alone. My first and final kiss is full of rippling sorrow—and the one I love is not here, and I must seek love again, and tell my tale from the beginning, if only to hear a familiar voice—my heart cannot bare itself, and the poison torments me and my head grows heavier. Am I not beautiful in my despair? Come closer.

I am almost ready to kiss you.

Once I was bathing in the forest—I love to be clean—it is a sign of noble birth, and I bathe frequently. While bathing, dancing in the water, I saw my reflection, and as always, fell in love with myself. I am so fond of beautiful things! And suddenly I saw—on my forehead, among my other inborn adornments, a new sign ... a strange sign ... Perhaps it was this sign that brought the heaviness, the petrified look, and the sweet taste in my mouth. Here a cross is darkly outlined on my forehead—right here—look. Come closer. Is it not strange? I did not understand at the time; I liked it—I thought it beautiful. But on the same day, on that same terrible day, when the cross appeared, my first kiss became also my last—my kiss became fatal.

Even now, I can taste the venom. I am preparing it for you. I was always fond of precious stones, but think, beloved, how much more precious is a little drop of my poison. It is such a little drop. Have you ever seen it? Never, never. But you shall. You shall see! Consider how much suffering, painful humiliation, powerless rage I had to endure in order to bring forth this one little drop. I am a queen! In this tiny drop, I carry death unto the living, and my kingdom is limitless, even as grief is limitless, even as death is limitless. I am queen! My look is inexorable. My dance is terrible! I am beautiful! One of many! One of many!

Oh! Come closer. Come to me. My story is not yet ended.

That day, I crawled into the cursed forest, into my green dominion. I was a queen, and like a queen I bowed graciously to the right and to the left. And they—they ran away! Like a queen I bowed to my subjects—and they, queer people—they ran. Why did they run? Look into my eyes. Do you see in them anything frightening—a terrible glimmer and a flash? Do you feel fear? Do the rays of my crown blind your eyes? Are you petrified? Are you lost? I shall soon dance my last dance—do not fall. I shall coil into rings, I shall flash my scales dimly, and I shall clasp my steel body to you in a gentle, cold embrace. Here I am! Accept my only kiss, my nuptial kiss—it is the deadly grief of all oppressed lives. One of many! One of many!

I love you.

Die!

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