

The Travelling Hypnotist

David Wheldon

I'm sometimes approached by streetwalkers who look like private women. Perhaps most men are: I wouldn't know. I don't talk about such things. I rarely speak much even in the course of my work: suggestion is made by expression and gesture as much as by word. I'm speaking now only because you don't know who I am or what I do. I don't completely know myself: when I'm publicly introduced on the stage I never recognize myself in the brief biography which is said to describe me. They believe their own words, it seems: but I'm not so easily taken in. Words rarely mean what the speaker intends. Carefully positioned hands do.

The yearning eyes — those are the ones you seek.

Last night, after a somewhat short church-hall performance tolerably well received, I was out on my usual nocturnal walk (necessary for getting to sleep: without an urban night-walk I lie awake til dawn), the high, closed cemetery gates to my right, past the adjacent Jewish cemetery, past the Earl of Leicester with its decorative Edwardian façade, then a side-street that I had never walked before, down a set of steps, through an arch and so to a small but formal park unknown to me, and there she was, a stranger to me, standing underneath a dim street lamp, one of those old electric street lamps mounted on an elegant cast-iron gas-standard. The light was poor, as I say. Her arms were crossed. She watched my approach, leaning back against the lamp post. I gave her a brief nod.

She leaned forward as I passed and uncrossed her arms and stood straight. She had seen something in that brief nod. 'Want sex, doctor?' she asked, her arms crossed again, her legs demurely together beneath her fawn raincoat, her shoes side by side. Her whole manner — her very posture — contradicted her words.

I stopped. I looked at her. Her face was in shadow, but I could see the glimmering specular highlights of her eyes above her high and prominent cheekbones. She had long, well-groomed mid-brown hair.

'Well, I suppose I do, but I'd better not. My wife wouldn't like it, and she'd know as soon as I got back home. She's pretty vigilant.' I listened to myself as I spoke. My voice seemed the voice of a stranger. 'One unfaithful act and my marriage would be over. We have never discussed this but it would be so.'

'I see. *Cherchez la femme.*' The young woman had a pleasant voice; she was not from round here but from nearer London, I would have said. Surrey. Guildford, perhaps. More remotely there was evidence of a North Welsh childhood.

She laughed. 'So: you are always to be trusted. Do you always do as your wife says, doctor?' She shook back her hair. I caught a glance of her face. The pupils of her eyes were night-wide.

'Yes,' I said, frankly. 'She's right most of the time.' I paused. 'It would be wise not to take the risk.'

'You poor man,' she said, smiling. 'Men who are obedient to their wives are always the most fun. Thus I have found. I can tell at once you don't come from round here. I don't myself. So we are two strangers who find ourselves in the same place. That means we can introduce ourselves. Have an arm and walk with me across town where I'm not known and on the way we'll have fish and chips and then some beer. Please.'

I'm good fun.'

She put her arm innocently in mine — a pleasant sensation — and we walked down a set of steps towards the town. Near the Queen of Hungary's Yard in St Benedict's we bought some fish and chips — she was scrupulous in paying for hers, though I offered — at the last moment I persisted, she relented and I paid for both — and we sat on a bench outside and ate them by the light of the shop window. She was a slim, slight woman with a rather thin face, not unattractive. Her hands were small and vulnerable-looking, but her fingers were long. On looking further at her I saw that she wore no cosmetic. She was obviously hungry. Her portion of fish was evidently somewhat bony, and, having quickly eaten the batter, she extracted the bones dexterously with the nails of her left thumb and forefinger. Her nails were practical, unpainted and well cared-for.

[This is a preview. The full story is about 4,500 words]

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