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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

# Fate Weaves a Web

By ALFRED I. TOOKE

*Destiny made a tangled snarl out of this man's life when it wove  
a net from which there was no escape*

**I** LAID the newspaper on Rodney Sanders' desk and pointed to the headline:

FLOODS HIT STATE. \$1,000,000 DAMAGE

"Early this year," I said, "you spent several thousand dollars lobbying for certain fat, juicy road-building contracts that would have netted you between half a million and a whole million dollars. When they were practically in the bag for you, you suddenly decided you didn't want them. Why?"

Sanders laughed. He pointed at the newspaper. "Worst floods in seventy years. Every dollar put into those contracts has been lost. The cuts filled in and the fills washed out. Every contractor involved is tottering on the verge of bankruptcy at this moment."

"How did you know things were going to pan out this way?"

Sanders replied "Alleppo!"

"Do you drink it, apply it externally, or eat it with a pinch of salt?" I asked.

"You expect to be nominated for Dis-

trict Attorney next election, don't you?" he countered.

I nodded.

"Fortune-telling in this state carries both fine and jail sentence, doesn't it?"

"Correct!"

"Two reasons why you never heard of Alleppo. He's a fortune-teller. But you don't believe in fortune-tellers, do you?"

"Never have, since that time at college when our gang visited a couple. Everything they said about me turned out wrong. They were fakers."

"Alleppo is the real McCoy. Do you know Bill Wendell?"

"I'm his lawyer."

"Well, six months ago, Bill told his family doctor that he was in for an attack of some obscure disease. The only things Bill knew about it were the name of it and that it killed you in a week if it got half a start. His doctor could find no symptoms, but, on Bill's insistence, sent him to a specialist, who found slight but unmistakable symptoms. They caught Bill's case in time. He lost the affected kidney instead of his life."

"If he knew so little about the disease, how did he know he was in for it?" I asked.

Sanders said: "Alleppo!"

"He must be good!" I conceded. "With the race meet starting next week, I'd like to meet him. How much does he charge for the names of a few winners?"

"He charges one thousand dollars a question."

I whistled.

"And limits you to three serious or useful questions. Stock-market tips and race winners are out. He has scruples against telling people how to get money without

earning it. He says that if he abused his power it would be taken from him."

"Joking aside, though," I said, "I'd like to ask him a serious question if you could put me in touch with him."

Sanders eyed me thoughtfully. "What question?" he asked.

From anyone else, that might have seemed impertinent, but he and I were bosom pals through school, college, and the Big Scrap. I hung out my shingle as a lawyer the same week he inherited a big building and contracting business from his father. We golfed, fished, hunted, attended the races, and spent our



"In dodging about like this, he realized that he was taking certain chances."

holidays together until the year we met Carmen Osborne at a lodge in the mountains. We both fell madly in love with her. I was the one she married. It was a supreme test of our friendship. I think Sanders felt bad about it for a while, but some time later he married Betty Grebb, a girl he had known for some years. To me, she seemed as stolid and unattractive as the name she bore, but she worshipped Rod, and he seemed satisfied. We all played bridge together two or three times a week, and Rod and I still attended the races together. I think we were both glad that neither of our wives cared much about the Sport of Kings.

I answered his question, and said, "I'd like to ask about accepting that nomination for District Attorney."

"I'll see what I can do," Rodney said. "I'll pass the word along that you want an appointment and that I think you are all right. If he agrees, you'll get a telephone call within three days. Otherwise there's nothing doing."

**I**T WAS on the third day that the telephone call came. I was just ready to leave the house to meet Sanders to attend the opening race meet, but a mellow voice with a clipped, foreign accent told me to go at once to room 384 in the Hotel Metropole, and to mention the matter to no one. "I am Alleppo's humble assistant," my caller finished, and then hung up.

Fifteen minutes later, still attired for the race track, I was being greeted by the possessor of the mellow voice. "The Great Alleppo," he said, "does neither see nor be seen." He pointed to a large screen that shut off half of the room. "Already in his hypnotic trance he is."

"This will all be strictly confidential, I presume?" I asked.

"In his trance, the Great Alleppo knows not who you are, nor is it neces-

sary. Afterward, remember your questions he does not, nor the answers that to you he gives. As for my humble self, that you paid the fee I shall remember, but all other things not."

I took the hint and produced the money. "Three thousand," I said, "for three questions."

"Then to me you must give, for a few moments only, some personal possession—your field-glasses, perhaps?"

I unslung them from over my shoulder and handed them over.

"Thank you. And your first question, it is what?"

"I have been wondering of late whether or not my wife is faithful to me," I said.

He stepped behind the screen. "The owner of these glasses, O master," he intoned, "would know his wife she is to him faithful or not?"

A voice with a cultured Oxford accent said, "The wife of the owner of these glasses is faithful to him, and always has been. She is, at the present moment, attending the matinee of a light opera with a lady friend."

The assistant reappeared. "You heard?"

I nodded. "My second question is: Am I, at any time, likely to develop any disease, and if so, what steps should I take?"

Again the assistant vanished behind the screen. "The owner of these field-glasses, O master," he intoned, "would know concerning disease."

"The owner of these," I heard the Great Alleppo reply, "has inherited through both maternal and paternal channels, a tendency to cancer." There was a distinct pause. "But he will not, during his lifetime, contract that, or any other disease."

"It's worth a thousand to know that," I told myself.

"You have a third question?" the assistant asked.

"If I am nominated for the office of District Attorney at the next election," I said, "is it best to accept or to reject the honor?"

The third time he disappeared. "The owner of these glasses, O master," he intoned, "would be advised whether to accept or reject the nomination for District Attorney."

For long moments the Great Alleppo was silent, then the words came slowly and deliberately. "The owner of these will not be nominated for such an office."

"That is all, O master!" the assistant said.

"Wait! You may tell the owner of these why he will not be nominated. Fate weaves a web. He will be murdered within a week."

**I**MAGINE my feelings if you can. The announcement stunned me for a long moment; then I shot question after frantic question at the assistant. "By whom shall I be murdered? Can I not prevent it? Why am I to be murdered? What shall I do? Where will I be when——"

The assistant raised a protesting hand. "Very much I regret! The Great Alleppo three questions has answered for you. No more he can do. Sleep for many hours he must."

"But can't I come back when he has slept?" I protested. "Tomorrow? The next day? I will pay any fee he demands."

The assistant shook his head. "The Great Alleppo could not, even should he wish. Absolute rest and quiet for a week he must have. His nervous and mental energy, which now is utterly exhausted, he must rebuild. But he who is forewarned, the web of fate may escape sometimes."

"But if he will just answer one more question—now——"

"Impossible it is! Your great scientists and inventors, they study for the months or the years one tiny atom of knowledge to wrest from the great stores that in the future lie. In the few seconds, the Great Alleppo many atoms of knowledge wrests from the future, because his nervous and mental energy to a penetrating focus he can concentrate. But afterward he must rest in proportion. I am sorry. To you I return these field-glasses."

Presently I found myself outside. Subconsciously I realized that my mind, still confused by this terrible prophecy, would not be equal to driving my car in the intricate maze of city traffic. I left it where it stood, and walked

Murdered! Within a week! Why? When? How? By whom?

Possible answers whirled around my brain in a fantastic tangle. I tried in vain to convince myself that the whole thing might be a fake. The Great Alleppo had not been a fake with Rodney Sanders and Bill Wendell.

"But he might be wrong in my individual case," I told myself. "At college those others were wrong about me!"

"There is an easy test," came the answer. "Go home and find out whether your wife did go to a light opera with a lady friend. She told you she intended to stay at home."

I turned my steps homeward. Carmen was alighting from a taxi as I reached the house. Rodney's wife, Betty, was with her.

"Betty took me to see *The Pirates of Penzance* for a surprize, John," Carmen greeted me delightedly. "I wish you could have seen it. It's just the nonsensical, whimsical type of thing you go crazy over!"

Perhaps it was because they were both so busy living over the high spots of the

play that I was able to get a grip on my emotions before they noticed anything wrong.

"... attending the matinee of a light opera with a lady friend."

The words of the Great Aleppo echoed in my brain. My last hope that he might have been wrong had vanished.

**I**T WAS not until the day following my soul-shattering visit to the great Aleppo that my mental chaos began to resolve itself once more into a semblance of order.

I had a decided objection to being murdered within the week. Aleppo's assistant had said something about a forewarned person having a possible chance to change the course of destiny. I resolved to try.

First I obtained a permit to carry a revolver on my person at all times, then bought a shoulder holster complete with a small but deadly-looking weapon designed to fit snugly under my coat.

I made a new will, and had it witnessed.

I dictated to Miss Hoskins, my private secretary, a series of memoranda covering the firm's policy on every matter of current importance, explaining that I might shortly take a vacation but was not certain when it would start.

"It all depends upon others," I told her, "and I may have to pop off and leave you at a moment's notice—and then again, I may not go at all. It is impossible to tell what will happen, or when, but these memos will enable Mr. Wendebell to carry on in my place at a moment's notice, if necessary."

I remember that I used just that phrasing. Fate was certainly weaving a web!

I went over my records to see if I could pick out anyone who might have

sufficient grudge against me to murder me. I found three names, and listed them on a sheet of paper:

Mike Gatinka: convicted through my efforts and sentenced to ten years for selling dope to school children. Had made threats to "get" me. Paroled a month previously.

Mexican Tony, convicted of manslaughter through my efforts. Had made no threats, but was of savagely vindictive nature, especially when under influence of marijuana. Released six months previously. Reported to have returned to Mexico.

George Smith, dope peddler, escaped from road gang two months previously. Whereabouts unknown. Had made threats.

I planned my course of action should one of them suddenly appear in the doorway. My hand would dart inside my coat, flash out again instantly, and I would have the drop on the intruder, whereupon I would bark in the traditional manner: "Stick 'em up!"

In a foolish moment I decided to see how quickly I could do it. I snatched out the gun. "Stick 'em up!" I barked—and at that moment the door shot open.

"Hey—I—don't shoot, boss!" a scared voice said as a pair of hands shot into the air sending a score of letters fluttering about the room.

Matters could have been worse. It was only the office boy.

"Gee, but you scared me!" he said as he brought his hands down. "I didn't know you packed a rod in a shoulder holster. You sure was quick on the draw. I bet you could've got the drop on Dillinger any time!"

"Young man!" I said sternly. "That was intended as a lesson to you. You have been told to knock on that door before you enter."

"I—I forgot this time, sir!"

"Don't forget again," I cautioned. "Next time I might do more than just practise on you!"

Fate had woven another strand in the web!

I changed all my habits as far as was possible. I left the house at different times and reached the office by different routes each morning. Sometimes I took taxis instead of using my own car when business called me out of the office. I had my lunch sent in. I went home at different times. For the first time in years I passed up the first week of the race meet and Sanders occupied our joint box without me; and Fate wove another strand for her web.

I avoided my club and either stayed at home in the evenings or went to small movie houses in the suburbs, though I let Carmen think I was at my club in order not to alarm her.

SIX DAYS of the fatal week came and went. I felt that if I could negotiate the seventh successfully all danger would be over. I redoubled my precautions. Reaching the office safely, I gave instructions that I was "out of town" to all callers, regardless of who they might be. I even refused to answer telephone calls.

"I want to think out my course of action on an important case I may have to deal with shortly," I told Miss Hoskins.

Fate certainly was weaving her web with fiendish ingenuity.

I left earlier than usual and went home by taxi. To Carmen's inquiry I replied that it was lodge night—as she knew—and my regalia needed going over. As Grand High Vizier of the local lodge, my presence was practically imperative and I had not missed a meeting since my election to the chief office three years before.

"What are you doing this evening?" I asked.

She held up a slip of pasteboard. "Ticket for *Annabel's Aunt*. Our usual

crowd bought up a box. I suppose it won't be any use waiting up for you?"

"I hardly think so," I said. "Special business tonight. It will run us rather late."

"Business!" She laughed musically. "And whose turn is it to pay for the midnight dinner at Tony's afterward?"

"Not mine," I relied, "so my appetite won't suffer!"

Someone has said that "a wise general does not announce his plans in advance", and I felt that if I was to outwit that arch-enemy, Fate, I must be wiser than wise. I kept my plans strictly to myself.

I left the house in full regalia which was concealed by a light coat, but I had not the slightest intention of being present at that lodge meeting. I directed the taxi man to a certain corner drug store. Before alighting, I handed him a generous fee and told him to wait five minutes and then drive away. I walked through the drug store and took a taxi on the other street, directing the driver to the Union Station. Arriving there, I hurried to a telephone booth.

In dodging about like this, I realized that I was taking certain chances, but I reasoned that if my death had been plotted, the murderer would expect to stage the event where I was certain to be on that particular night, namely, on my way to, or returning home from the lodge—or perhaps at the lodge or the usual midnight dinner at Tony's afterward. Here, of course, some man might suddenly go berserk for no apparent reason, as people sometimes do, and choose me for a victim; or gangland might stage a scene of carnage in which I might stop a wild bullet. Such things cannot entirely be guarded against. At any rate I felt safer than if I had attended the lodge.

Through the glass window of the

telephone booth I watched and made reasonably sure that nobody had trailed me. I dialed lodge headquarters. I told them I was out in the country with a bad blowout and the nearest garage was twenty miles away and I could not possibly reach the city in time to officiate at the lodge ceremonies.

A third taxi took me to within half a block of the rear of my house. I walked the rest of the way, my hand on the weapon in my shoulder holster, and reached the side door of my house unmolested. A moment later I had let myself in. Carmen, I reasoned, would by now have left to join her theater party. Cook would be in the kitchen reading some "confessions" magazine. The other servant would be out. However, I took no chances. I slipped my shoes off, and cautiously ascended the stairs in my stockinged feet.

A single light burned in the hall upstairs. I tiptoed to the door of the room Carmen calls my "den", but which really is a sort of depository to which unwanted *lares* and *penates* gravitated. I use it occasionally for a little extra studying when big cases are pending.

The door was half open. I slipped in and settled myself in the depths of the most disreputable but most comfortable overstuffed chair in the house.

It was an ideal point of vantage. I could hear everything that went on in the house, front and back, upstairs and down; yet my presence would be unnoticed unless someone entered the little room and came right up to peer between the enveloping arms of that all-embracing chair, and I would hear and see him first.

I reached for a cigarette, but put it back again. That would be giving Fate too good an opportunity. Cook could catch a whiff of smoke, softly notify the police over the kitchen telephone and . . .

"No smoking!" I told myself. "And no noise till after midnight."

I MUST have dozed, for though I had heard nobody come in, I suddenly became aware of voices ascending the wide front stairs: ". . . so I said I had a headache and would go home after the first act. I can tell John all about that, and he'll never suspect. He's a trusting old dear. I suppose he's having a thrilling time doing the honors at that stuffy old lodge meeting now!"

That was Carmen's voice, of course, but what did it matter whether or not I suspected she had left the theater because of a headache, I wondered. That was Betty who had come with her, no doubt.

"I've given cook fifty cents for the movies," she continued, "so we won't see any more of her for a couple of hours."

I failed to get the drift of that remark until the other voice spoke. It was not Betty's. It was not feminine, but masculine, and it said: "You're a wonderful little schemer. By the way, I brought these back this time. They're John's. He has mine. They're both alike, you know, so we didn't notice when we got them switched."

It was Rodney Sanders' voice. His first words had thrown my brain into a turmoil of suspicion. The rest registered only subconsciously. He had brought something that was mine, and I had his. If they were alike, what did it matter if we got them switched? Our fountain pens again, or a deck of cards, no doubt, but nothing that could be of any possible consequence beside the startling, soul-devastating fact that he was strolling calmly into Carmen's bedroom while Carmen had got rid of the cook for an hour or two; and I was a "trusting old dear"!



Time is a clumsy measure for life. In the next startlingly brief moment I lived a year. In the tick of a clock I re-lived ten years, and many, many things took on a new significance. Then, for me, time resumed its measured marching as I got slowly, noiselessly to my feet. The deadly little weapon I had carried as a protection against Fate now pointed avengingly before me.

The murmured words that floated to me as I strode along the carpeted hallway set my brain on fire afresh. I reached the door of our bedroom. I shot it wide open. I said "Good evening!" in a voice which, despite the mad rage in my brain, did not waver. It was the only thing I could think of to say. It must have sounded ridiculous, and rigged out as I was in the full regalia of the Grand High Vizier, I must have seemed a second Bluebeard to Carmen.

Sanders was crushing her to him, imprinting fierce kisses on her lips when I shot the door open and spoke. She screamed. Startled, he turned his head. The blood drained from his face, while bewilderment flooded his eyes, giving way suddenly to recognition.

"My God, it—it's John!" he said. "It's all a mistake, John! I just called to return your——"

"It was not a mistake," I interrupted. "Neither will it be a mistake to rid the world of such a poisonous, crawling snake as you!"

I pulled the trigger. Carmen screamed again, and fainted. Sanders slumped to the floor, his hand clutching at the hole in his shirt front.

I have heard of people doing queer things in their last moments. Sanders finished what he had started to say, the pink foam spraying from his lips with every gasping word:

"I called to return those, John!" He pointed to something behind me. "Remember we bought 'em s-s-same time. Had initials engraved. Only diff-difference. Got 'em switched. I had yours. Y-you had mine. Everything s-s-straight n——" A choking gurgle defeated the last word Rodney Sanders would ever try to utter.

**W**HEN the police arrived they found me staring at the significant thing to which Sanders had pointed as he died. When they asked me what had happened, I answered, gesturing with the gun that I still held: "He had my field-glasses. I had his. We got them switched somehow!"

"But that's not why you shot him, is it?" a policeman demanded. "Did you come home unexpectedly and find him with your wife?"

"Yes," I said. "You see, he was the one who was to be murdered, not I. The field-glasses got switched, and——"

"Snap out of it!" Someone eased the weapon from my fingers and placed it beside the field-glasses. I recognized Detective-Inspector Carnady. "It's my duty, to warn you that whatever you say may be used as evidence, John," he said. Then lowering his voice: "Better not say anything until you get a grip on yourself. It'll come out all right. You know the defense . . . unwritten law . . . violated sanctity of your home . . . came in unexpectedly and found him . . . unpremeditated. No jury would ever convict."

I think I managed a smile as I shook my head. "I haven't a chance in a million!" I told him. "Fate wove a web!"

Need I go into detail about the trial? If you read the papers, you know how short and conclusive it was.

The "unwritten law" plea advanced by my counsel did not have the ghost of a

chance, for the prosecuting attorney proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that the murder had been deliberate and premeditated.

I swore that it was not premeditated, but he proved that a week previous to the murder I had secured a license to carry a gun on me at all times, and that I had immediately purchased a gun and shoulder holster and worn it. My office boy gave evidence to prove that I was "quick on the draw" and therefore must have practised a good deal. I had made a new will six days before the murder. For the first time in many years I had failed to attend the race meet with Sanders, indicating, presumably, that something had gone wrong between us. I had told several mutual acquaintances that special business to which I had to attend personally was the reason—yet my firm had no such special business. My private secretary testified that five days before the murder I had dictated special memoranda detailing the policy to be followed on all matters of importance so that the staff could carry on in my absence. It was proved that for the entire day preceding the murder I had shut myself in my office, refusing to see anyone, and saying that I wished to plan out my course of action on an important case I might have to deal with shortly. It was proved that the said case must have been personal, since it was not a business case. Carmen testified that I had led her to believe that I would attend the lodge meeting, while the lodge registrar stated that I telephoned that I was delayed out in the country. Thanks to my lodge regalia, only partly concealed by my light coat,

three taxi-drivers testified as to my movements in detail on the fatal night.

But why go on? I took those steps to outwit Fate in the belief that it was I who was to be murdered, but each one turned into a damning point of evidence to prove that the murder I committed was deliberate and premeditated. Each step I took was a strand Fate wove in the web that was to enmesh me.

The jury took only fifteen minutes to reach their verdict of "Guilty of murder in the first degree", and they made no recommendation for mercy.

But I have no more time for writing. I see the warden and the chaplain coming.

As a lawyer, I have often wondered what were the last thoughts of the men I have sent to the electric chair. Mine will be about my visit to the Great Aleppo, and of the assistant who took the field-glasses I wore, and who prefaced each question with: "The owner of these glasses, O master, would know——" For as you have seen, the owner of those glasses was not I, but Rodney Sanders. It was his wife who was faithful and who was at a matinee with a lady friend. It was he who was to be murdered within the week.

In a few moments, on this fatal Friday the 13th, you will see the lights flicker and dim when the hand of Justice throws a switch and diverts several thousand volts of that deadly current through the thing that will cease to be me. And I shall have thought my final thought. It will be this:

"Fate wove a web! There was no escape!"

