

Weird Tales

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Contents for November, 1928

Cover Design.....	C. C. Senf
<i>Illustrating a scene in "The Mystery in Acatlan"</i>	
The Eyrie	580
<i>A chat with the readers</i>	
The Mystery in Acatlan.....	Rachael Marshall, Maverick Terrell 582
<i>It happened in Acatlan, and the horror of it drove the American to seek forgetfulness in strange drugs</i>	
The Polar Doom.....	Edmond Hamilton 589
<i>From under the polar ice a horror out of long-dead ages is loosed upon the world to spread terror and destruction</i>	
The Head From Ecuador.....	Robert Lee Heiser 608
<i>The sight of that shriveled head and red hair, with the tattoo-marks he knew so well, was too much for Dan Hack</i>	
Flame of the Ages.....	Robert Choate Albright 616
<i>Shabad Nagaur, high priest of the Fire Temple of Oudh, let the sacred flame expire on the altar</i>	

[CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE]

A Story of the Fire-Worshippers

FLAME OF THE AGES

By **ROBERT CHOATE ALBRIGHT**

SHABAD NAGAUR, high priest of the Fire Temple of Oudh, knelt in silence before the altar of the Parsees. Incense of a nauseating sweetness smoldered on the sacred shrine. A ruby-red flame burned steadily in a bronze bowl directly in front of the kneeling priest, casting its roseate light on the blackened walls

of the ancient temple. More than a foot upward it mounted, suffusing all about it with a dull, red glow.

Such was the Soul of Ormuzd, God of the Guebres. For eons it had burned thus—since the beginning of time itself, Shabad had been taught to believe. And why should he doubt traditions which had been carried

down to him by generations of the holiest of mortals, high priests of the Temple of Oudh? Had he not proved himself an apt pupil to the venerable Sherhazur, his predecessor?

While yet a lad, Shabad had learned by heart the *Zend-Avesta*, the holy book of the Parsees, and had startled his teacher with his grasp of the Vohu Mano and the Akem Mano. Before many years had passed old Sherhazur had been unable to answer his questions, and had sent the boy to other temples that his thirst for knowledge might be satisfied. It was no wonder, therefore, when the aged Sherhazur passed away, that Shabad Nagaur, "the boy prophet," was made priest in his stead.

Far into the night Shabad knelt in silence before the altar of the Parsees, gazing intently at the ruby flame, the soul of the good deity Ormuzd. He must always gaze thus except at brief intervals when other priests of the Temple of Oudh took his place at the altar. For was it not written in the *Zend-Avesta* that Ahriman, the evil deity, always hovered near, waiting for the holy men to relax their vigil? What would happen then, Shabad for all his knowledge did not know. Three things alone concerned him—he was the high priest of Ormuzd; he must guard his shrine against Ahriman; he must watch the flame. It had been burning since the beginning of time; it must burn until the end. His ancestors had protected it despite the persecutions of the Persians. Throughout the bloody onslaughts of Calif Omar they had nourished it. Driven into exile, they had carried it with them into India and built for it the Temple at Oudh. And there it flamed before him, the fire symbol of Ormuzd.

But the priest of the Parsees is human, and being the wisest and most learned of his race, Shabad passed moments when he doubted many things—doubted even the tenets of his own religion. It was his

went to pass such thoughts off lightly, attributing them to the temptation of Ahriman, the evil one. But this night he dared to reflect longer than usual upon the fate which had placed one so learned as he to watch a little flame for the rest of his days, even though that flame be the symbol of the good deity Ormuzd.

Perhaps Shabad sank too deeply into revery. Perhaps the thickness of the incense made him strangely drowsy, for his eyes closed and his head fell forward upon his breast. Kneeling before his altar, the high priest of Oudh fell fast asleep.

WHEN Shabad awoke it was with the realization that all was dark in the temple. The sacred fire no longer flamed before him. A terrible fear gripped his heart. Dazed, he groped his way to the altar. The bronze bowl was there, but it was cold, cold for the first time in all of the centuries.

The high priest fell prostrate to the floor and lay there trembling. He wondered why the walls of the temple did not tumble in upon him. Why did Ahriman not strike him down? But no, Ahriman would not strike him down. Ahriman must regard him with favor, for had he not through his own wanton carelessness destroyed a faith which was as old as the world itself? Had he not destroyed the soul of Ormuzd?

Shabad cursed the day he had been born—cursed himself for ever taking the holy vows. Better that long since he had been stretched in death upon the Temple of Silence, where the sacred vultures come each day to pick the flesh from the Parsee dead, and the bones fall one by one through the grating, into the vault below.

Reason told the high priest that Ahriman had not extinguished the flame. It had gone out, he told himself, because of his own stupid failure to replenish the bowl with sacred oil. Had he but kept his vigil, he

might have saved the ruby fire. But no, he had fallen asleep like a drunken low-caste! He pondered on the consequences of his fateful blunder. What would his people do now that the faith of their fathers was taken from them, destroyed by their most trusted guardian of the temple? Must they now seek another creed? Must they become hateful Mohammedans, Buddhist fools or Christian dogs? Shabad shuddered to think of it.

It was then that the thought came to him. Why should they ever know? It would be a simple matter to add oil to the bowl and rekindle the flame. The Parsees trusted him; they would never suspect what had taken place. They would come to the temple as of old and offer up sacrifices to the sacred fire, which, alas! was no longer sacred. They would never know that the soul of Ahriman burned in the flame in the place of the good deity Ormuzd.

Shabad's conscience rebelled. Had he, high priest of the Parsees, fallen so low? Would he thus make mock of the religion of his fathers? He sobbed audibly. What must he do? He dared not think of the wrath of his people when they found that the soul of Ormuzd no longer burned in the bowl of bronze. They would curse him, spit upon him and drive him from the temple. They would do more than that. They would tear out his heart and throw his body to the vultures, on top of the tower of the dead.

The high priest raised himself to his knees and listened intently. All was silent as death. Slowly he made his way through the darkness to the rear of the shrine, where with fumbling hands he opened a small door at the base of the altar. He drew from the covert a torch, which he lighted. Carrying the taper and a small urn, he returned to the front of the altar. Swiftly he filled the bronze bowl with oil from the urn, and applied the

torch. The light sputtered a moment, then leapt to full height.

Shabad fell on his knees before the shrine. His body trembled convulsively and it seemed his heart would burst. For a few moments he struggled to gain control of himself. The deed was done beyond retraction, he reasoned. He must not falter now. Raising his head he called softly the name of the priest who each morning took his place before the altar. "Kotah!" he called. Again, in a voice higher pitched, he chanted, "Kotah!"

A rustling of robes was heard in a near-by corridor, and a priest appeared. He salaamed three times as he approached. Shabad returned the salutation, and with burning eyes searched the other's face. "Could Kotah know?" he asked himself. But if the priest had suspicions, his face did not betray them. He took his place beside Shabad before the shrine, and together they chanted a verse from the *Zend-Avesta*, to the glory of Ormuzd. It seemed to Shabad that he saw the hateful face of Ahriman grinning at him from the bowl.

Their devotions over, the high priest arose and went out of the room, leaving Kotah to guard the shrine.

AS THE SUN rose to its fullest height in the heavens that morning, the holy men of the Temple of Oudh were in a high state of alarm. Though they had searched every corner and crevice of the temple, their high priest, Shabad Nagaur, could not be found. Finally one of them noticed the vultures circling in great numbers above the Temple of Silence. The priest thought it strange, for there had not been a death in Oudh for a fortnight. Climbing to the top of the tower, he found Shabad stretched upon the grating, his right hand clutching the handle of the sacrificial knife. He had plunged its golden blade deep into his heart.