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JOURNEY

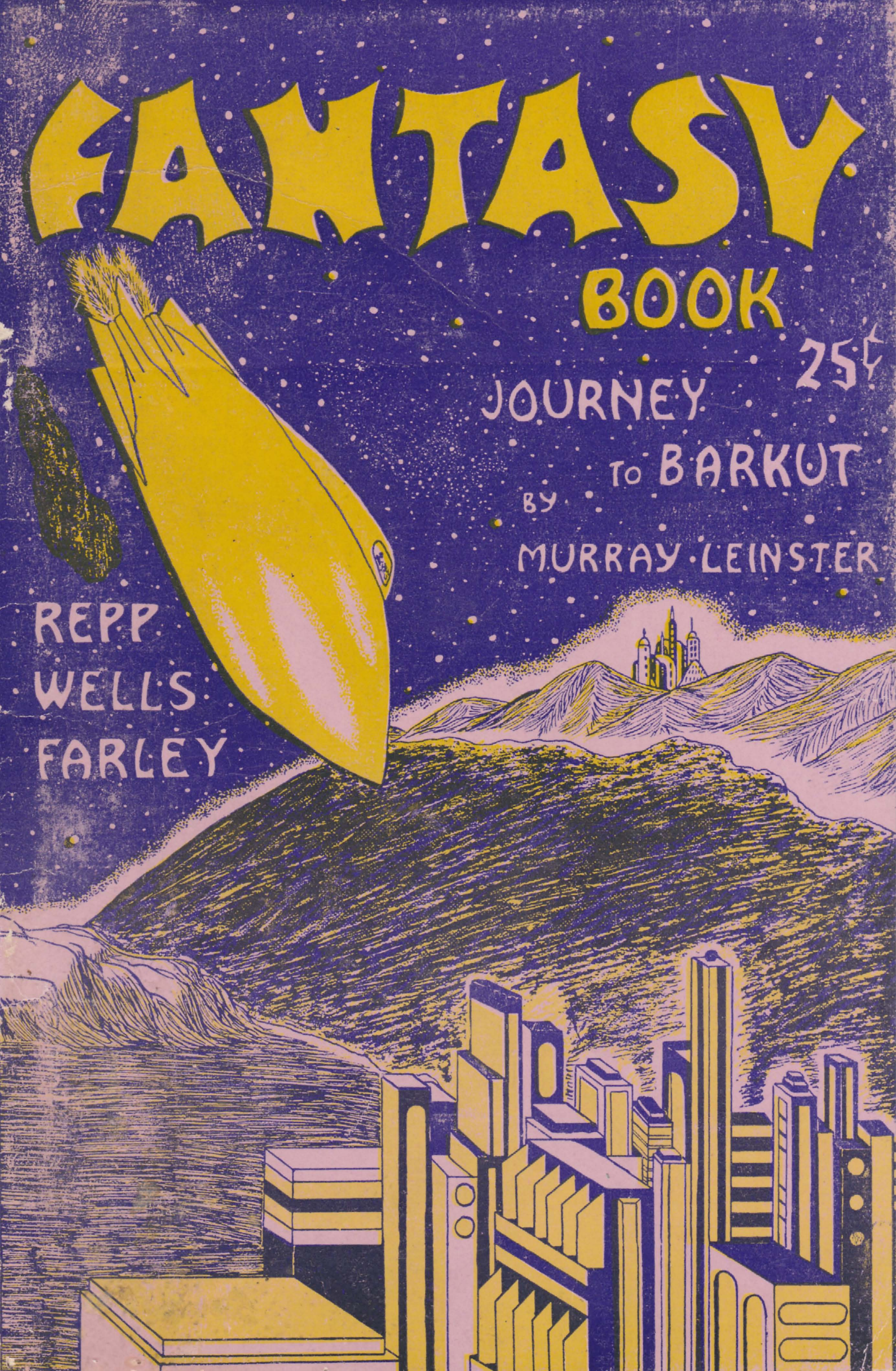
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TO BARKUT

BY

MURRAY LEINSTER

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JOURNEY TO BARKUT

BY MURRAY LEINSTER

PART ONE

I.

THIS is the story of what happened to Tony Gregg after he had learned about the fourth dimension—or maybe it was the fifth or sixth—in a *shishkebab* restaurant in the Syrian quarter on lower East Broadway, New York. That's not all he learned, of course, but the more exotic things he learned turned up later, and they were all of them unexpected. He didn't even go to the restaurant to learn about the fourth dimension in the first place. His visit was simply for *shishkebab*, which is a dish of lamb cubes skewered on small round sticks and cooked in an unlikely sauce containing grape-leaves. It was accidental that he asked the owner of the restaurant about a coin that he—Tony—carried as a luck-piece. It was gold, and possibly valuable, but no numismatist would admit that it came from any known nation or age or clime.

Tony'd bought it for a lucky charm in one of those tiny shops on side-streets in New York, where antique jewelry and ivory chessmen and things like that are on display in the windows. He picked it out because it looked odd. His conscience—Tony had been raised with a very articulate conscience—reluctantly consented to the purchase because the coin was very heavy for its size and might be gold. It certainly wasn't a medal and therefore had to be a coin. It had an inscription in conventionalized Arabic script on one side, and something on the other that looked like an elaborate throne without anybody sitting on it.

But when Tony tried to look it up there simply wasn't any record in any numismatic catalog of any coinage even resembling it.

One night—this was his first visit, not the time he learned about the fourth dimension—he went down on East Broadway for *shishkebab*, and it occurred to him to ask the Syrian restaurant-keeper what the Arabic inscription might say. The Syrian read it, and told Tony that the inscription was that of a ten-dirhim piece, and it said it was a coin of Barkut. But he had never heard of any place called Barkut, and neither had Tony. So Tony got a little curious about it, and actually spent an hour in the public library, a few days later, trying to find out something about either the coin or the country it came from. But there was nothing to be found out. The coin was solid gold, though. A jeweler verified that. As bullion, it was worth somewhere around six dollars. And since Tony had paid only a dollar and a half for it, he was rather pleased. His conscience, even, smugly approved. It isn't often that you pick up anything in an antique shop that you can sell for more than you paid for it, no matter what people tell you. So Tony kept it for a luck-piece, and every night on the way home from the office he paused outside Paddy Scanlon's Bar and Grill and gravely tossed the coin to see whether he should have a drink or not. Which was a pretty good way of being neither too abstemious or too regular in such matters. His conscience consented to this, too.

He didn't really think the coin brought him luck, but the small mystery of it intrigued him. He was a rather commonplace young man, was Tony. He'd been in the war, but he never got beyond a base camp. He sat in uniform and pounded a typewriter for three long years. Then he got out and got his old job back—at the same

salary—and went back to his old lodging-house at a higher rate per week. He was glad he had the coin, because he liked to imagine things. His conscience sternly and constantly reminded him that he should be polite, attentive to his duties, efficient and no clock-watcher, and the radio reminded him every morning while he was dressing to use a specific tooth-paste, hair tonic, breath deoderant, and brand of popular-priced suits. It was pleasant to have something vague and mysterious around. The coin could not have been made as a novelty or anything like that, and it came from no country in the world. He liked to think that there was some mystery about its having reached his hands; some significance in the fact that he had come to own it and no one else. To make it seem more significant, probably, he got into the habit of tossing it for all decisions of no particular moment. Whether to go to a ball-game or not. Whether or not to eat at his regular restaurant. His conscience dourly reserved decision.

He'd owned the coin two months, and the habit of using it to make small decisions had become fixed, when one evening he tossed it to see whether or not he should go to his regular restaurant for dinner. It came tails. No. He was mildly amused. To another restaurant uptown? Tails again. He flipped and flipped. His common sense told him that he was simply running into a long sequence of tails. But he liked to think that the decisions of the coin were mysterious and significant. Tonight he almost became excited when one place after another was negatived. He ran out of restaurants he could remember having dined in. So he tossed the coin with the mental note that if it came heads he'd find a new restaurant, where he'd never dined before. But the coin came tails. Negative. Then he racked his brains, and remembered the little Syr-

ian restaurant down on lower East Broadway. He flipped for that. The coin came heads.

He got on the subway and rode downtown, while his conscious made scornful comments about superstition. He went into the small converted store with something like an anticipatory thrill. His way of life was just about as unexciting as anybody's life could be. He had been pretty well tamed by the way he was raised, which had created a conscience with a mind of its own and usually discouraging opinions. His conscience now spoke acidly, and he had to assure it that he didn't really believe that the coin meant anything, but he liked to pretend to believe it.

So he sat down at a table and automatically flipped the coin to see whether he should order *shishkebab* or not. The swarthy, slick-haired proprietor grinned at him. There was a bald-headed man at a table in the back—a man in impeccably tailored clothing, with gold-rimmed eyeglasses and the definite dark dignity of a Levantine.

“Say,” said the proprietor, in wholly colloquial English. “You showed me a funny goldpiece last time you were here. You still got it? Mr. Emurian, back there, he knows a lot about that stuff. A very educated man! You want I should ask him about it?”

This seemed to Tony a mysterious coincidence. He agreed eagerly. The restaurant-keeper took the coin. He showed it to the bald-headed man. They talked at length. The restaurant-keeper came back.

“He never seen one like it,” he reported. “And he never heard of Barkut, where it says it came from. But he says there's a kinda story about coins and things like that, that come from places that nobody ever heard of. He'll tell you if you want.”

“Please!” said Tony. He found his heart beating faster. “If he'll join me——.”

“Oh, he’ll have a cuppa coffee, maybe,” said the restaurant-keeper. “On the house. He’s a very educated man, Mr. Emurian is.”

He went back. The bald-headed man rose and came with easy dignity to Tony’s table. His eyes twinkled. Tony was flustered because this Mr. Emurian looked so foreign and spoke such perfect English and was so perfectly at ease.

“There is a legend,” he told Tony humorously, “which might amuse you. It’s an old wives’ tale, and yet it fits oddly into the theories of Mr. Einstein and other learned men. But I know a man in Ispahan who would give you a great sum for that coin because of the legend. Would you wish to sell?”

Tony shook his head.

“Say — five hundred dollars?” asked Mr. Emurian, smiling behind his eyeglasses. “No? Not even a thousand? —I will give you the address of the man who will buy it, if you ever wish to sell.”

He laughed.

“This man,” he explained amiably, “would say that the coin comes from a country which is not upon our maps because it is unapproachable by any ordinary means. Yet it is wholly real and actually has a certain commerce with us. It is—hm—have you ever heard of worlds supposed to be like ours in other—ah, dimensions, say, or in parallel but not identical times?”

“I’ve read Wells’s *Time Machine*,” said Tony awkwardly.

“Not at all the same,” the dark man assured him. “And notions of machines for traveling between sets of dimensions or in time itself are quite absurd. Discoveries of that sort are never drastic! When electricity was discovered, it was your Franklin who observed that it was no

new force, but quite commonplace. Every thunderstorm since time began had demonstrated it. Similarly, if travel between worlds or to other times should ever become really practical, it is certain that the discovery will not be dramatic. It will turn out that people have been doing it for centuries as a matter of course, without ever realizing it."

"You mean—" Tony stopped.

"The legend," said Mr. Emurian, beaming, "suggests that your coin came from a world not our own. That it came from a world where history quite truthfully denies much of the history we truthfully teach to children." He regarded Tony zestfully and said: "Ordinarily, two things which are equal to the same thing are equal to each other. But two places which are exactly equal to each other—are the same place! Now consider! Suppose that somewhere there existed a world in which Aladdin's lamp was real and in good working order. Suppose that upon it there was a place which was absolutely identical with a place in this world. It would have to be a place where the working or not working of Aladdin's lamp made absolutely no difference. Now, according to the legend, those two places, on two worlds, would actually be one place which was on both worlds, and which would serve as a perfectly practical gateway between them. Travelers would pass casually through it without ever noticing it. You and I, perhaps, pass through such gateways every day without the least realization."

The dark man seemed to find amused satisfaction in the look of mystified enthusiasm on Tony's face. He waved a manicured hand.

"Look at this restaurant. Here. Tonight," he said, beaming. "Today, for example, Calcutta could have vanished in a tidal wave and be sunk forever under the sea.

Or it could not. Here and now, we knowing nothing about it, such an event would still have made no slightest difference. So that from this restaurant tonight we could walk out into two different worlds—you into the one where such an event had taken place, and I into the world where it did not. And I might go and live peacefully and die of old age in the Calcutta which to you was utterly destroyed.”

“But we are in the same world!” protested Tony. “We’ll stay in the same world!”

“Probably, but are you sure?” Mr. Emurian twinkled through his glasses. “We have never seen each other before. How do you know that I have always lived in this particular world? How do you know that the history of the world in which I was born is the same? —I was surely not taught from the same history books!— And if we separate here tonight and you never see or hear of me again, how will you know that I remain in the world you inhabit?”

Tony said painfully, but with his heart beating fast: “I guess I won’t. But there’s no proof, either, that——”

“We agree,” said Mr Emurian, nodding. “There can be no proof. I have told you a legend. It says there are other worlds. They are not quite real to us, because we cannot reach them at will. But according to legend they touch each other at many places, and it is possible to travel from one to another, and in fact we constantly visit the frontier-cities of other worlds without ever knowing it. And we do not know it because we are a part of our own world, and there is an attraction; a magnetism; a gravitation perhaps, which by ordinary means draws us back before we stray far from the gateway of a world which is not our own.”

He regarded Tony benevolently through his eyeglasses.

“As for your coin: sometimes that gravitation or attraction is not enough. We stray deep into other worlds and doubtless we are very unhappy. Or an object from another world strays into ours. But always the gravitation or the magnetism remains to some degree. —That is what my friend in Ispahan believes, so that he might be willing to pay you as much as two thousand dollars for the coin in your hand.”

Tony looked at the coin with deep respect. He had never in all his life owned anything worth even a fraction of two thousand dollars. His conscience spoke firmly. He said wistfully: “I—suppose I ought to sell it, then. I can’t really afford to carry around a luck-piece as valuable as that. I—might lose it.” Then he added unhappily: “I suppose your friend is a coin-collector?”

“Not at all,” said Mr. Emurian. “He is a business man. He would use the coin, I am sure, to get into this other world and set up a branch of his business there. He would import Barkutian dates or dried figs or rugs, or possibly gold and frankencense and myrrh. He might deal in ivory and apes and peacocks in exchange for Birmingham cutlery, printed cotten cloth, and kerosine lamps. And if the atmosphere were congenial he might establish a residence there, staffed with pretty slave-girls and Mameluk guards, and settle down to a life of luxury.

Tony said more wistfully still: “How’d the coin guide him to Barkut?”

Mr. Emurian shook an admonitory finger.

“You accept my legend as fact, my dear sir! You are a romantic!” Then he added comfortably: “I do not know that he would consider that it was not quite real in this world, and hence should be exempt from some physical laws. He would expect it to have some tendency to become more real, which it could only do by returning to

its own time and place. How the tendency would show itself, I cannot guess. But I will write down my friend's name and address. I promise that he will pay you a high price for your token."

Tony Gregg looked almost hungrily at the coin. An idea came into his head. His conscience protested indignantly.

"I'll toss it," he said unhappily. "Heads I sell it, tails I don't."

He tossed. The coin came tails. He gulped in relief and pushed back his chair.

"It's settled," he said, with smiling eyes. He flushed a little in his excitement. "And—and I won't take your friend's address because I—don't want to be able to change my mind."

Mr. Emurian beamed.

"A romantic!" he said approvingly. "It is admirable! I wish you good fortune, sir!"

Tony thanked him confusedly, paid his bill and departed.

Outside, in the spottily lighted street, he felt more or less dazed, though his conscience was bitingly reproachful and demanded specifically that he go back and get the address he had just refused. This was in the Syrian quarter, on lower East Broadway, with signs in Arabic in those scattered shop windows which were still lighted. Most of the buildings about were dark and silent, and there were only occasional lumbering trucks for traffic. The atmosphere was a compound of the exotic and commonplace which did not make for clear thinking. The facts were dazzling, too. If the coin in Tony's pocket was worth two thousand dollars, that in itself was enough to make him dizzy. He had never carried more than a week's

salary in his pocket at any time, and never that much for long.

So he rode uptown on a subway train which had come from Atlantic Avenue, Brooklyn, and would go uptown only to Times Square. At Times Square he changed trains like a sleep-walker and went further uptown still. But he was lost in excited, dizzy speculation which hardly let him notice his surroundings. He had come up from the subway exit and was walking toward his lodging when he realized he'd been too agitated to eat the *shish-kebab* he'd paid for. He came to a diner, and was still hungry. He automatically flipped the coin. It came heads, and he entered the diner. The man at the stool next to him got up and went out. He'd had a paper that he'd stuck under him when he finished with it. Tony thriftily retrieved it while waiting for his hamburger and coffee. Then a thrill went all the way down his backbone and he nearly choked at the same time. The paper was *Racing Form*.

On the way uptown Tony'd had a bitter argument with his infuriated conscience. He'd insisted defensively that if an importer of dates and dried figs and rugs in Ispahan could find profit in a journey to Barkut, why couldn't an up and coming young American do even better? Tony was no business man, but he'd been trained to believe that anybody who did not desire above all things to be a brisk young executive had something wrong with him. So he'd been insisting feverishly that commerce in electric refrigerators, nylon stockings, fertilizer, lipstick and bubble gum was his life's ambition, and this was his chance! But actually, his mind had kept slipping off sideways to visions of white-walled cities under a blazing sun, and of lustrous-eyed slave-girls and *Mameluks* armed with scimitars, and of camel-caravens winding over desert wastes.

It was in a hopeless confusion of such images that he left the diner and went to his room, clutching *Racing Form* fast. He sat up till long past midnight, flipping the coin and charting out a crucial test of its virtues. He dreamed chaotically all night, and when morning came he awoke with common-sense—his conscience—reviling him bitterly for his plans.

But he would not be shamed out of them. His conscience grew strident and then almost hysterical. He sneaked out of the house with a hang-dog air as if to avoid his own eyes, and he rode to Belmont with his hat pulled down over his forehead. When he put down the first two dollars at the betting window his conscience had been reduced to the point of simply jeering at him for a fool and a romantic, refusing a chance to sell a crazy luck-piece for two thousand dollars so he could use it to guide him in making two-dollar bets! A horse named Rainy Sunday? his conscience jeered derisively. Tomorrow would be Black Friday when he was fired for taking an unauthorized day off!

But Rainy Sunday won, paying six for two. Then Occiput paid off. Then, in order, Slipstream, Miss Inflation, Quiz Kid and Armageddon... And the daily double...

Tony rode back to town in a sort of stunned composure. He had a trifle—a few hundred—more than eleven thousand dollars in his pocket. His conscience told him with icy disapproval that it had all been coincidence, and that now the proper thing for him to do was put that eleven thousand dollars in good, conservative securities, and never go near a race-track again.

So Tony went to his room and packed in feverish haste while his conscience yammered at him in mounting agitation, paid his rooming-house bill and went out and flag-

ged a taxi while the mood of resolution—and escape—was upon him. In the taxi he flipped the coin to see where he should head in order to take the coin nearer to Barkut. If there was a mysterious attraction trying to pull the coin back to its own world, it would obviously work on probabilities, operating to cause coincidences that would take it home. And if somebody was letting it guide him by flipping it for heads and tails . . .

There was eleven thousand dollars to make the theory seem likely, and a couple of weeks later Tony considered the theory proved.

He had reached, he was fairly sure, a place well off any imaginable map of the world he had been born in. He stood on a sandy beach with blue sea to his left and desert on all other sides. A middle-sized whirwind, or sand-devil, spun meditatively in one place a quarter-mile away, seeming to watch. And Tony had one desert Arab, very much unwashed, squirming under his right foot and two other equally unwashed scoundrels coming furiously at him with spears from right and left. At this moment he thought irrelevantly but not at all regretfully of the tossings of the coin that had begun his journey.

He did not have time for philosophizing, however. So he swung the long, curved scimitar in his right hand, pulled his belted-in-the-back topcoat out of the way with his left hand, and attended to his would-be assassins.

This, however, was two weeks later. Meanwhile . . .

IT COULD have been a very happy journey, but Tony's conscience spoiled everything. It spoke with an inflection very much like the maiden aunt who had raised him. Tony would get into trouble, said his conscience gloomily, for

slipping off without a passport, and actually bribing somebody to help him do it. He should have paid the income-tax on that eleven thousand dollars and put the rest in gilt-edged bonds. He should *not* have flown across the South Atlantic in a plane of such antiquity to a flying-field in Tunisia instead of to a proper airport where he would have been arrested for not having proper papers. He should *not* have slugged the Tunisian customs-official who was planning to arrest him anyhow, even though the coin had blithely come heads when tossed for the decision. And certainly, having done so, he should not have tucked a hundred-dollar bill in officialdom's fingers for the man to find when he came to. To be sure, the official had pocketed the bill and kept his mouth shut, but fifty would have been enough. After all, where was more money coming from when this was gone, and what was Tony gaining in exchange for wasted cash?

So said Tony's conscience, which was a killjoy. He ignored it as much as he could. It was exhilarating to dodge regulations and red tape after a lifetime subject to them. His conscience said aggrievedly that he was now a felon and would presently be confined in a jail with primitive sanitary arrangements. Tony's maiden aunt, who had formed his conscience, had been strong on sanitation.

But Tony paid no heed. He spent money lavishly and got in return things which he prized highly. A sight of the sun setting on the desert. Once a bare glimpse of a dusky Arab damsel's face when the wind blew aside her veil. The smell of horses and camels and the East generally—concentrated it was bad, but when sufficiently diluted it was delectable—and that exciting moment near the end of his journeying when a thief tried to rob him in the bazaar at Suakim on the Red Sea and Tony grandly

rescued him from the blows of indignant merchants who had meant to rob Tony in another manner. Afterward, too, he hired the thief to be his guide and interpreter. The coin came heads when he tossed it for the decision.

These things gave him satisfactions not to be obtained from the actions approved by commonsense and the code of conduct a right-thinking young future executive should abide by. Tony thrived on them. He put on weight. He grew sunburned. Contentedly going where the toss of a coin suggested, knowing nothing of what the next instant would bring except that it would be unexpected, he straightened up from what had been an incipient book-keeper's stoop. He walked with a freer motion and looked—this was the odd part—a much more likely prospect for a young executive's job than he had ever looked before.

His conscience grudgingly conceded as much, but waxed ever more bitter as Tony spent his funds lavishly for progress toward whatever unknown destination the supposedly homing coin would lead him to. Curiously, the coin did come an almost mathematically exact number of heads and tails over a reasonable period of time. The laws of chance were not broken by an excess of heads, or tails, or excessively long runs of either. There could be absolutely no evidence that Tony's travels were guided by anything but purest arbitrary chance. But his journeying was convincingly direct, when he plotted it on a map. He'd come as straight as transportation facilities would allow to Suakim on the Red Sea.

Suakim is, and always will be, a hot and sleepy and odorous town full of Arabs, Tamils, Somalis, and other persons who regard non-Moslems—their official rulers included—as the destined and legitimate prey of the Faithful. Tony's newly-hired interpreter considered Tony his express and particular quarry. For a time he tried vali-

antly to collect by persuading Tony to make purchases on which he would collect commissions of from fifty to seventy-five per cent. For one long night he waited hopefully for Tony to snore, so that he could rob his baggage. But Tony slept dreamlessly and silently, like a child. Then his opportunity came.

On the third day of Tony's stay in Suakim—the coin had come tails at any suggestion of departure—the interpreter's chance had come. Tony made some small purchase in the bazaar. He gave an Egyptian pound in payment. In the change there was a small silver coin with an inscription in conventionalized Arabic script on one side, and an ornate, empty throne on the other. Tony regarded it with apparent calm. He showed it to his hired thief.

"This is a coin of Barkut," he told the man who had tried to rob him. "It is my desire to go to Barkut. Arrange it."

He went back to the fly-infested hotel where he paid nine prices for his lodging. He spent some time flipping the coin. He had changed a good deal inside as well as out, once he had learned how to grow really stern with his conscience. The coin turned up some heads and some tails. If it actually had a homing instinct, it gave him essential information. If everything had been a matter of chance up to now, and the series of coincidences between fact and the heads-and-tails decisions of the coin were about to end, it simply led him to preparations for an over-elaborate suicide.

Within the hour, his interpreter came back to the hotel with voluble assurance that he had engaged a *bakhil* to carry Tony to Barkut. It was taking on the last of its cargo now. It would put out into the harbor at sunset, and Tony must board it secretly during the night because of harbor regulations.

Tony packed. He was reasonably well outfitted, now. He dressed for his journey in the absolute ultimate of the inappropriate. He wore a soft felt hat, brightly-polished brown shoes, and a camel's-hair topcoat with a belt in the back. He slipped a revolver in his pocket.

Night fell. Tony dined, as well as the resources of Suakim would permit. He felt expansive and contented. Two hours after dark, his interpreter returned with news that the *Bakhil* was out in the harbor and awaited his coming. Tony went down to the water-front of Suakim—a not too cautious move in itself, alone and at night. He climbed down a ladder into a small boat and placidly let himself be rowed out in the darkness. The night was black, save that stars glowed enormously against a sky like velvet. The sleepy, murmurous sounds of the city were very romantic indeed. There was the plashing of waves, and somewhere a wraith of string music where revelers made merry, and somewhere a dog barked indignantly in the darkness. That was all, except the sound of the oars.

Presently a dark form loomed ahead. The *bakhil*, an ungainly shape some seventy or eighty feet long, with the stubby thick mast and colossal boom of her lateen rig. Tony's interpreter hailed. A guttural voice replied. The small boat came alongside the *bakhil* and the interpreter steadied it for Tony to step on board. He climbed to the deck. The *bakhil* stank glamorously of fish and pearl-oysters and goat-hides and kerosine and tar and bilgewater and humanity. Its deck was an impenetrable maze of shadows in the starlight. Tony drew a deep breath of complete satisfaction. He moved aside to be out of the way.

Then there was an infuriated howl and the sound of oars being worked at panic-stricken speed. Tony's inter-

preter and guide had obsequiously held the small boat to allow him to board the *bakhil*. The unwashed cutthroats of its crew prepared to receive Tony's baggage. Instead, they saw and heard the shore-boat being rowed away at the topmost speed of which the interpreter was capable.

The *bakhil*'s crew howled with rage, which was not righteous indignation at the witnessing of a theft, but the much greater rage of being cheated of the privilege of stealing Tony's possessions for themselves. Men raved up and down the deck, uttering deep-throated maledictions at the top of their voices. Then, foreward, the loudest voice shouted down the others. A small boat from the *bakhil* splashed overside. It went cursing after the racing oar-strokes of the boat with Tony's baggage in it.

Tony stepped delicately to the stern and ensconced himself against the rail. He got out a cigarette-lighter and lighted a cigarette and puffed it in complete satisfaction. This event had been implied in the series of heads and tails the golden coin of Barkut had turned up when he spun it for decisions on how he should prepare for the trip by sea. All this uproar was consoling confirmation of the homing tendency of the ten-dirhim piece. He smoked beatifically, while out on the dark harbor water one small boat manned by cutthroats went raging after another small boat manned by a sneak-thief, and the crew of the *bakhil* listened between cursings to the sounds on the water.

Far off, there was a howl of fury. Still farther, a triumphant yell of derision. The small boat of the *bakhil* came back in a thick fog of sulphurous language. Evidently, Tony's late interpreter had made the shore and gotten away with his loot. The disappointed mariners returned in an ugly mood.

The boat's crew returned to the deck. The boat itself

was made fast overside. There was much muttered talk. Then men came astern to where Tony smoked in blissful excitement. They surged toward him deliberately. He snapped his cigarette-lighter. Its glow showed him the villainous bearded faces of the *bakhil's* crew. Hairy chests and ragged garments. Knives ready.

But the lighter's flame showed them Tony, puffing joyously on his cigarette, with one hand holding the lighter and the other a revolver ready for action.

There was a pause without words.

Then a launch's internal-combustion engine caught somewhere. It began to run with a sort of purring roar. A harbor-launch. A police-launch, probably, ready to investigate the howls of fury on the harbor's still waters. If Tony were murdered here and now, his body might have to be slid overboard still unrobbed, and even that would be dangerous. More, he might kill somebody first.

The sound of the police-launch motor moved across the harbor. Then a voice grunted savagely on the *bakhil's* deck, and the group before Tony melted. Men swarmed to ropes and spars. The great lateen sail rose creaking against the sky, and men hauled noisily at a crude windlass to lift the *bakhil's* anchor. Then slowly, slowly, slowly, in what were hardly catspaws of wind off the land, the *bakhil* gathered way.

It moved creakingly but very smoothly over the water. When the police-launch came near, Tony tossed his cigarette overboard and blandly watched it go by. He was contentedly confident that all went well.

But his conscience wailed, as the police-launch departed. Now he would be killed, and there would be nobody in all the world who would ever admit to the least idea of his fate. He could be traced—perhaps—to Suakim, though even that was unlikely. But from Suakim he would have

seemed to have evaporated. With the dawn the *bakhil* would be remote from all witnesses to happenings on its deck. Tony would be murdered and robbed, and his few remaining possessions divided among these cutthroats who surely had no intention of taking him to any agreed-upon destination! And what good had he done or even tried to do? Even if he unthinkably escaped murder, now, he had not even pretended to make inquiries in Suakim on the probable products of Barkut, of the market it might offer for imports, or even of the possible profit in import-export trade! He had thrown away his life—and more, here Tony's conscience grew acrimonious—he had not made one single move that a brisk young executive would have made first of all!

But as the *bakhil* cleared the harbor and the wind freshened and she bent to the breeze, Tony smoked contentedly. He reflected that something like this untraceability was necessary for a journey to Barkut and other places not on typographic surveys. If the area about a gateway were ever searched for a person who had gone through it, that very search would change it, so that somehow it would cease to be a gateway. In ancient days, when news traveled slowly and searches for missing persons were unthought of, there must have been many gateways indeed. That would account for the wild fables which none believed, nowadays, but which were probably history in some co-existing world. Doubtlessly there was once a brisk trade between places where magic lamps were functional devices, and prosaic places like the world of Tony's youth. Now gateways were probably rare and trade almost non-existent. But not quite. He had the proof of that!

So Tony smiled happily in the starlight at the *bakhil's* stern. He let his imagination run riot in pictures of white-

walled cities under a brazen sky, and camel-caravens in slow motion over fabled sands, and—to be candid about it—he meditated with some interest upon the possibility of lustrous-eyed slave-girls whose sense of duty to their master might make them very interesting companions—if one happened to be their master.

When the sun rose he was still thinking about the sort of residence a successful young executive might set up in Barkut if that land were as uninhabited as the bald-headed man had suggested in the *shishkebab* restaurant. But about him there was no sign of any sort of civilization. The *bakhil* glided smoothly over waves that were neither high nor negligible. The sea was of an improbable but fascinating color. The sky was lapis-lazuli, and the *bakhil* was sheer archaic clumsiness. The heavy, bending boom which carried her mainsail seemed about to crack with its burden of patched canvas and the wind which strained it. The crew was as unsavory a gang of cut-throats as ever a director sought in vain for a motion-picture. There was not a man who did not carry a knite in plain view, and few who were not scarred by knife-slashes. The captain's face looked almost like a rough sketch for a crossword puzzle blank.

No one spoke a word to Tony, but all glowered at him when he met their eyes. The *bakhil* sailed on a course Tony could not determine, toward a destination he could not guess—except that it surely was not Barkut—and there was apparently no soul on board but himself who spoke English or had any feeling but that of murderous antipathy toward him.

He flipped the golden ten-dirhim piece and felt exceeding peace fill his being. Crew-members saw the glint of gold in the sunshine. If Tony moved from the rail and one of them could get behind him, the result, he realized,

the result would be final. If he dozed, he would wake in another world, but not very likely Barkut. His life hung upon the fact that he had a revolver, and that it might cost lives to kill him. But he waited contentedly all through the baking-hot day for nightfall, well aware that with the darkness plans would be made to abate the nuisance of his living presence.

Came the sunset. Glorious reds and golds. The surface of the sea looked like molten aureate metal. The whiskered villains of the *bakhil's* crew protested themselves in pious prayer unto Allah, and then began low-toned discussions over the most practical way of inserting some six or seven inches of steel into Tony's liver.

He beamed. He was alive. This was life and zest and adventure such as he had never known or dreamed of before. His conscience was despairingly silent. Tony would not have changed places with anyone on earth.

The sun sank below the horizon. Darkness seemed to flow over the world. Shadows appeared on the *bakhil's* deck, and Suhail, the great star, shone brightly in the dimming sky. Then it was night.

Men foregathered forward. And Tony tossed overboard his twentieth cigarette of the day, and heard it hiss briefly as it touched the water. He moved briskly.

The helmsman reeled and sank to the deck. Darkness hid the event, but he had been the victim of a scientific gun-whipping learned by Tony in a neighborhood movie palace. Tony re-pocketed the revolver, hauled the small trailing boat close under the *bakhil's* stern and pushed the great tiller hard over. The lubberly *bakhil* came heavily up into the wind and hung there, its lateen sail flapped crazily. The ship careened, the massive boom swung over and increased its heel, and then the *bakhil* seemed simply to shiver irresolutely, dead in the water.

Tony slipped over the stern into the small boat. He took to the oars as vociferous outcry arose on deck. He had no idea where he might be, only that he was roughly twenty hours slow sail from Suakim. He might be anywhere along the African eastern coast, or along either of two shores of Arabia. The essential thing was to get away from the *bakhil*.

He got away. When some sort of order had been restored on the ship, Tony was already lost in the darkness.

After an hour or so of steady rowing, Tony curled himself up in the bottom of the boat and went contentedly to sleep. His last conscious thought was a mild wonderment that even this landing-boat had a pervading aroma of fish, preal oysters, goat-hides, bilge-water, and the unwashed humanity that had recently occupied it.

He was jarred awake by the thumping of the boat's keel against something solid. He opened his eyes and saw a colossal, amiably stupid face gazing open-mouthed down at him. He knew immediately that it was an illusion because it was five feet from ear to ear and definitely on the misty side, a countenance formed in vapor.

He closed his eyes resolutely and told himself to wake up. When he opened them again there was nothing in sight but very blue, very clear sky above the gunwale. But the boat bumped again. Tony sat up and saw a sandy shore and a sandy beach—and a sandy stretch of pure barrenness beyond. There was no surf. Gentle waves were gradually edging the boat toward the strand on which the swells broke in half-hearted foaming.

There was just one really curious feature about the world he saw. That oddity was a minor, dark-colored whirlwind—actually a sand-devil—which wavered its way along the beach a hundred yards away. It looked—the thought was fanciful—rather like the picture of a *djinn*

coming out of a bottle that had been in a copy of *Arabian Nights* which Tony had owned as a small boy. However, there was no bottle—and the whirlwind was traveling in a wholly natural fashion. It went a couple of hundred yards further and then seemed to stop, spinning in a meditative fashion.

Tony sat at ease until the boat grounded finally. Then he seized the moment of a receding wave to step overside and walk smartly ashore without wetting more than the soles of his low-cut shoes. Safely on land, though, he was almost infinitely alone. There was sea on the one hand and sand on the other. That was all. There was not even a sea-bird flapping over the waves. But the whirling sand-devil remained. It was rather peculiar that it was so dark, when whirling above such white sand. It looked rather like smoke.

He flipped the ten-dirhim piece. He marched valiantly along the shore in obedience to its decision. He covered half a mile. The whirlwind persisted. It moved inland. It grew taller, as if to keep him in view. Odd. . .

Then three men on camels came over the crest of a sand-dune and halted, regarding him. He waved to them. They moved slowly toward him, shading their eyes to search for possible companions beyond and behind him.

They came closer, dismounted and regarded him ominously. They were whiskered, and very dirty, and they were almost certainly verminous. One handled a scimitar suggestively. The others carried spears. A half mile away, the small whirlwind moved restlessly, but the three men ignored it.

Tony flipped the ten-dirhim piece. It glittered golden in the sunshine. The expressions of the trio changed from merely ominous puzzlement to resolution. The short man with the scimitar swaggered up to Tony. The others

watch with glittering eyes. The short one said something guttural and threatening. Tony flipped the golden coin. The man with the scimitar grabbed—and Tony swung, hard. He felt a certain naive pride when the whiskered one went down. He snatched up the scimitar and said sternly to the others:

“I’m on my way to Barkut. I’ll pay you—”

But the other two men were coming for him at a run. They had very practical spears, which they carried in a decidedly menacing manner. They made for him from both sides, but the one on the left was nearest. Tony swung the scimitar wildly. His stroke neatly severed the head of the spear. He followed through. Somehow the second spearman got in the way. He saw his victim with unforgettable clarity. He was pure bearded villainy, with one eye and a sword-split nose. Then the scimitar landed. The result was lurid and unquestionably lethal. Tony wanted to be sick. To avoid it he turned on his two remaining foes. The short fat man was on his feet now, but still groggy, and the other spearman looked dazed. Tony chased the two of them with his reddened scimitar until they vanished over sandhills. They were headed straight for the whirlwind, but they swerved from it even in flight.

Tony stopped, panting. He went back to the scene of the conflict. But he carefully refrained from looking at the man he’d hit with the scimitar. There were three camels, kneeling. Tony wanted to get away from there, so he tethered two of them to the third and mounted that one, but nothing happened, so he kicked it. The beast came to life, rising hind end first, so that Tony nearly fell off. It resignedly began to move in some indefinite direction. The other camels followed docilely. The whirlwind

moved companionably along with them, never very near, and never quite out of sight.

Hours later—many hours later—a white-walled city appeared in the distance. Date-groves surrounded it. There were minarets within the wall, and the lacy structure of a palace. A camel-caravan moved unhurriedly away from the gates, bound for some place of mystery.

The whirlwind fell behind as Tony approached the city, but it stretched upward and upward—as if to keep him in sight—until it was but the most tenuous of mists. Then it vanished suddenly, as if it had collapsed.

Tony Gregg rode up to the nearest city gate and slid down his camel's fore-leg. Soldiers in turbans and slippers, carrying flint-lock muskets, looked at him in lively suspicion. He essayed to speak. They essayed to speak. Presently two of them took him gingerly by the arm and led him through the city streets. The smells and sights and sounds he encountered were those of a dream-city—though the smells were not exactly a pleasant part of the dream. There were flat-topped houses and veiled women and proud camels and bearded men. There were barred, narrow windows and metal-studded doors, and projecting upper storeys to the houses, which leaned out above the narrow streets and nearly blotted out the sky.

The two soldiers led Tony, thrilled and satisfied, into a dark doorway. They released him and stepped back. An iron gate closed with a conclusive clang. Tony blinked back at them and saw that the doorway was completely filled by a grille of very solid and very heavy grim iron bars. He was in a prison. He was in a partially open-air dungeon. He was, in fact, in the clink.

This was the manner of his arrival in Barkut.

To be Continued

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JOURNEY TO BARKUT

BY MURRAY LEINSTER

(Part Two)

SYNOPSIS: Meek Tony Gregg finds his lucky charm is really a coin of Barkut, fabulous Arabesque world of djinns, and magic. Guided by the coin Gregg travels to Africa, thence to Barkut, and, arriving in that country's capital, is imprisoned on suspicion of being a djinn.

THREE WEEKS LATER, in mid-morning, Tony sat comfortably in the shady part of the courtyard and looked more or less dreamily at the slave-girl Ghail's legs. She had nice legs, and a lot of them was on display. They were slim, as a girl's legs ought to be, and they tapered nicely to the knees, and then they flared just the right amount at just the right place below them, and went down to very nice ankles, and below them to small bare feet—very dusty at the moment—one of which tapped ominously on the floor of the courtyard. He was still kept behind a locked iron grate, technically imprisoned, and his conscience had had a swell time pointing out to him how completely irresponsible and hair-brained and half-witted all his actions had been. He was, however, unworried except over the reaction that tapping foot might presage.

At first, of course, he'd been totally unable to speak Arabic, and nobody in Barkut seemed able to speak English. He'd tried to communicate from his original prison cell with the help of a dog-eared guide-book he'd picked up second-hand in Suez. The vocabulary it offered was limited. It gave the phrases for complaining that prices were too high, that the food was overripe, and that the

speaker wanted to go back to his hotel. But in Barkut Tony had been charged nothing, the food was good if monotonous—but fresh ripe dates were a revelation to him—and he was in jail and had no hotel. After two days of this unsatisfactory conversation, he'd been moved to a convenient cell-and-courtyard in the palace. He'd been inspected by various whiskered people he thought were officials, and then the slave-girl, Ghail, appeared and resolutely set to work to teach him to talk.

That was the way she undoubtedly looked at it. Tony was presumably an adult male, but he babbled only a few Arabic words, and those with a vile accent. The slave-girl settled down to the job with something like a scowl. She was long-legged and lissome and had an air of firm competence, and he knew she was a slave-girl because married woman and the marriageable daughters of citizens walked the streets—if at all—only when swathed in voluminous robes and with veils which complied with the strictest of Moslem traditions. This girl Ghail was not swathed to speak of, and she was not veiled at all, and she was distinctly pretty and very far from shapeless. But she regarded Tony with a scowling disparagement which made him work earnestly to learn to carry on a conversation.

Matters had progressed nicely in three weeks, and Tony found himself possessed of a talent for languages. But now she tapped her foot ominously on the floor of his comfortable prison. She said in measured calm:

“Now, just what do you mean by that?”

“I wanted to know.”

Tony spoke apologetically. But he was pleased with the fluency he displayed in the Arabic she had taught him.

“And just why did you want to know the name of my owner and the value in money that is placed upon me?” demanded the girl.

“Sooner or later,” explained Tony, trying hard to be convincing, “I shall be questioned by the rulers of this

place. I think that is why you have been sent to teach me the language. When I am questioned and can explain myself, I shall become high in favor and rich. It was my thought that then—Allah permitting—I would purchase you from your owner.”

The slave-girl's foot tapped more forbiddingly still.

“And for what purpose,” she demanded icily, “would you wish to purchase me?”

Tony looked at her in pained astonishment. His conscience mentioned acidly that this conversation was not only improper but indiscreet. A brisk young executive would never——. To which Tony replied that he would not have much fun, then. When his conscience began a heated rejoinder, he cut it short.

“Truly,” said Tony in false piety, “someone has undoubtedly said that the desires of a man's heart are many, but that if there is not one woman more desirable than all else, he is not human.”

His Arabic was still sketchy, but he put it over. The girl's eyes, surprisingly, burned.

“You are human?” she demanded skeptically.

“All too human,” admitted Tony, “What else?”

She stood up in queenly indignation. Then she smiled, but scornfully, like someone speaking to a half-wit or worse.

“You came across the desert from the sea,” she said tolerantly, “riding one camel and leading two others. But an hour before your coming, one of the watchers on the city wall had seen a *djinn* in the desert. When you came, so stupid that you could not even speak the language of humans, do you think we did not know you for what you are—a *djinn*?”

“A *djinn*?” said Tony blankly. The word was one of the very few—alcohol was another—which would be the same in Arabic and English. “Do you mean those creatures of the Thousand and One Nights?”

“Of history—yes.” Ghail's tone was bitingly scornful.

“And if we had doubted, within the hour there came a Bedawin to the city gate, a one-eyed man with a sword-slit nose, who told us of your taking the form of a bale of rich silk, torn open upon the beach of the sea. When he and his companions alighted from their camels to gather up the wealth, you changed instantly to the likeness of a young man strangely garbed and ran swiftly to their camels and flogged them away faster than the men could follow. The man demanded his camels, and they were those you brought to the gates of the city. So they were yielded to him. Do you deny now that you are of the djinn?”

Tony swallowed.

“A one-eyed man with a sword-slit nose?” That was the man he had had to kill, back at the seashore. He’d been trying hard not to remember him, though if he’d ever had to pick out anybody on looks alone to be worked over with a scimitar, that man would have been the one. But he could not have come and demanded camels! It was not possible! Tony had left him a very messy object on the sand, and had chased his two companions with the scimitar. He swallowed again, very pale.

“You could not speak our human language,” Ghail continued tolerantly. “So I taught it to you. We hoped to make a bargain with you, because some of you *djinn* are willing to be traitors to your race. Perhaps you are ready to make such a bargain. But it is insolence for one of the *djinn* to think of purchasing a human slave!”

Even Tony’s conscience was stunned now.

“L-look!” he said desperately. “In my world, *djinns* are fables! What do they look like?”

“When the watcher on the city wall saw you on the desert,” the slave-girl told him in patent scorn, “you had the form of a whirlwind. Why not? Is not that the way in which you travel?”

Tony swallowed yet again. His conscience had made a quick recovery. Now it began to say something piously

satisfied about now look what a jam he'd gotten himself into,, actually thinking romantic thoughts about an idiot girl who believed in imaginary creatures like *djinnns* and *efreets*! But Tony shut it up. He saw implications of the theory of multiple worlds that he hadn't realized before. What is true in one world is not necessarily true in another. What is false in one world, also, is not invariably false in another. Actually, if there are enough worlds, anything must be true somewhere. Anything!

And he remembered—and flinched at remembering—his impression of a huge, vaporous, open-mouthed face which had been looking down at him in the small boat when he waked on the shore. He remembered the sand-devil, the whirlwind, which had looked like dark smoke in spite of the fact that it was whirling over white sand. It had kept pace with him as he went to meet the Bedawin and have them attempt to kill him. It had hovered interestedly near during that encounter. And it had wavered hopefully after him all the way across the desert to this city.

He gulped audibly. The inference was crazy, but if this was a world in which djinns were real, then craziness was sense. And then something else occurred to him.

“How long after my arrival did the one-eyed man come to claim the camels?” he demanded.

The slave-girl shrugged.

“One hour. No more. That was why we were sure.”

“And the camels were stolen by the seashore.”

“You stole them! By the sea.”

“I traveled some hours by camel,” said Tony grimly. “He followed their footprints in the sand, if he knew where to demand them. He traveled as far on foot as I did on camel-back—if he tells the truth! But it took me five hours to reach the city from the sea on camel-back. Yet he made the journey on foot in only one hour more. How fast does the one-eyed man walk? As fast as a camel, even trailing?”

The girl, Ghail, stared at him. Her face went blank. It was a five-hour journey from the sea to the city. She knew it as well as Tony. That was by camel. On foot it would take a man ten hours or better. If the one-eyed man had trailed the camels, he could not possibly have arrived so soon. Not possibly.

"A whirlwind followed me all the way," said Tony. "And—I killed a one-eyed man with a slit nose as he and two companions tried to rob me. Somehow, I think that the one-eyed man who got the three camels sometimes doubles as a whirlwind."

His conscience was strickenly silent. But Ghail knitted her brows and stamped her bare feet and snapped a number of Arabic words she had never taught Tony. They crackled. They sparked. They seemed to have blue fire around the edges.

"The misbegotten!" she cried furiously. "The accursed of Allah! From his own mouth comes the proof that he lied! *He* was the *djinn*! He has made mock of the wisdom of men! Now he, and all his fellows, will laugh!"

She turned upon Tony.

"And you," she cried, "are as stupid as the *djinns*! Why did you never ask about your camels." Then she added suspiciously: "But were they camels? Perhaps they also were *djinns*! Perhaps it is all a trick! You may be another *djinn*! This might be——"

Tony threw up his hands.

"In my world," he said helplessly, "*djinns* exist only in fables."

"Your world?" snapped the girl. "How many worlds did Allah make? And if *djinns* are fables, why is the throne of Barkut empty?"

"On the coins?" asked Tony helplessly as before.

She stamped her foot once more.

"On the coins and in the palace! What sort of tool are you? You say you are human? Will you drink of the *lasf* plant?"

"If *lasf* is not something spelled backwards with added vitamins, and if other humans drink it, I have no objection at all!"

She jumped to her feet and hurried to the barred gateway of the courtyard adjoining his cell. She spoke imperiously through the bars. Soon she was back with a polished brass goblet containing a liquid. She tasted it carefully, as if its contents might be doubtful, and then offered it to Tony.

This is *lasf*," she said sternly. "It is poisonous to the *djinns*. If you drink, it is of your own free will."

Tony drank it. From the expression on her face it seemed to be a action of extraordinary importance. He was tempted to make a flourish, but made a face instead. It was not wholly bad, however. It had a faintly familiar flavor, as of something he had drunk before. It tasted a little like some of the herb teas his maiden aunt had dosed him with as a child. From experience he knew that the flavor would last. He'd keep tasting it all day, and it ought to be good for something or other, but what?

He handed back the goblet.

"I wouldn't say," he remarked, "that it would be a popular soft drink back home, but I've tasted worse."

The girl stared at him in seeming stupefaction. Then, as he regarded her expectantly, she suddenly began to flush. The red came into her cheeks and spread to her temples, and then ran down her throat. He followed its further spread with interest. When it had reached her legs she abruptly ran to the gate and hammered on it, crying out fiercely. Soldiers with whiskers and flint-lock muskets appeared instantly, as if they had been kept posted out of sight for an emergency which could only be created by Tony Gregg. They let her out, scowling at him.

He sat down and breathed deeply, staring at the stone wall of his dungeon-courtyard. She'd believed him a *djinn*? *Djinns* were creatures of Arabian mythology. They were able to take any form, and sometimes were

doomed to obey the commands of anybody possessing a talisman such as a magic ring or lamp. At other times they could scare the pants off a True Believer not so equipped. They kidnapped princesses, whom the heroes of the Arabian Nights unfailingly rescued, and they fought wars among themselves, and they were not quite the same as *efreets*, who were always repulsive, while *djinns* might take the form of very personable humans. They were also not quite so dreadful as *ghuls*—from which the English word “Ghoul” is derived—who live on human flesh.

There was a wooden bench against the wall at which Tony stared abstractedly. He became aware that it was oscillating vaguely. It thumped this way, and that, and just as the oddity of its behavior really caught his attention, the bench fell over. It tumbled sidewise with a heavy “thump” to the hard-baked clay floor.

Tony looked startled. Then he got up and went over to the bench. At a moment when *djinns* were recently made plausible, erratic behavior of furniture suggesting ghosts was practically prosaic. He examined the overturned object. There was a minor quivering of the wood as he touched it. It felt almost alive.

He heaved it up, so completely offbase mentally that he acted in a perfectly normal manner. He was actually too dazed to do anything else. The quivering of the bench stopped. He saw a bug on the hard-baked clay—a beetle, lying on its back and wriggling its legs frantically. It was pressed solidly into the clay, as if the full weight of the bench had thrust it down without crushing it. It was a trivial matter. An absurd matter. It was insane to bother about a bug on the ground——.

But as he looked down at the wriggling black thing, its outlines misted. A little dustiness appeared in mid-air, down by the floor. Then Tony Gregg’s hair stood up straight on end, so abruptly that it seemed each separate hair should have cracked like a whiplash. He backed away, goggling.

And a tiny whirlwind appeared, and rose until it was his own height or maybe a little taller, and then an amiable but unintelligent female face appeared at the top of it. The face was two feet wide from ear to ear. It was a bovine, contentedly moronic face with no claim whatever to beauty. It beamed at him and said:

“Sh-h-h-h-h!”

Tony said;

“What?”

“There is danger for me here,” said the female face, beaming. “I have hidden here for days. I was”—it giggled—“that beetle under the bench. Before that I was a fly on the wall. My name is Nasim. Please do not tell that I am here!”

Tony gulped. He clenched his hands and stared at the swirl of dust on the courtyard floor. It went down practically to a point where he had seen the bug pressed in the clay, but at his own shoulder-height it was almost a yard across, like an elongated, unsubstantial top which swayed back and forth above its point of support.

“You are—” Tony gulped—“a—a *djinn*?”

“I am a *djinnee*,” said the beaming face, coyly.

Tony gulped again.

“Oh . . .”

The face regarded him sentimentally. It sighed gustily.

“Do I frighten you in this shape?” it asked, more coyly than before. “Would you like to see me in human form?”

Tony made an inarticulate noise. The fat face atop the whirlwind giggled. The mist thickened. Substance seemed to flow upward into it from the ground. A human form appeared in increasing substantiality in the mist. The round face shrank and appeared in more normal size and proportion on the materializing human figure. Tony’s mouth dropped open. He abruptly ceased to disbelieve in the existence of *djinns*. He was prepared to concede also the existence of *efreets*, *ghuls*, leprechauns, haunts, Big

Chief Bowlegs, spirit control, and practically anything anybody cared to mention. Because from the small whirlwind a convincingly human female form had condensed.

The pink-skinned, rather pudgy figure cast a look of arch coyness upon Tony.

"Do you prefer me as a human woman?" asked the figure, giggling. "I would like you to like me . . ."

Tony caught his breath with difficulty.

"Why—er—yes, of course. But—just in case somebody looks in the gate, hadn't you better put some clothes on?"

The *djinnee* who called herself Nasim looked down at her human body and said placidly:

"Oh. I forgot."

Garments began to materialize. And then there was a clanking at the gate, and then a howl of fury, and a flint-lock musket boomed thunderously in the confined space of the courtyard. The pink-skinned, pudgy female form seemed to rush outward in all directions. There was a roaring of wind, and a dark whirlwind, giggling excitedly, sped upward and fled away. Even in flight, and even in the form of a whirlwind, it looked somehow rotund and it looked somehow sentimental.

And then Tony was knocked around in the middle of the excitement that followed. A half dozen soldiers in baggy trousers and slippers were firing thunderously but futilely at the vanishing patch of smoke in the sky. And there was a fat man with a purple-dyed beard, and there was Ghail, the slave-girl, with a great deal more clothes on than before. She looked at Tony with a distinctly unpleasant expression on her face.

"Now," said Ghail ominously, "would you tell me the meaning of that *djinn* hussy, without clothes on, being in the very palace of Barkut?"

Tony's conscience, also, caught its breath and began to express its highly unfavorable opinion of things in general, and of Tony in particular.

CHAPTER FOUR

Tony Gregg's conscience had been formed by the worthy spinster aunt who raised him. Having no more normal outlet for the creative instinct, she had worked on Tony's conscience. And following a celebrated precedent, she made it in her own image. In consequence, Tony had a rather bad time.

That night, with somewhat the effect of pacing the floor in anguish beside his bed, his conscience gave him the works. Horrible! Horrible! said his conscience. Here it had spent the best part of his life trying to make him into a person who, in thirty or forty years of diligence, scrupulous attention to his duties, and a virtuous and proper life, would attain to the status of a brisk young executive. Tony's conscience conveniently ignored the fact that after thirty or forty years of virtue and scrupulosity, Tony would neither be young nor brisk. And what had Tony done? demanded his conscience bitterly. He had won more than eleven thousand dollars in the low and disreputable practice of betting on horse-races. But had he invested that windfall in gilt-edged securities? The question was rhetorical only. Tony knew that he had not. He'd come on a wild-goose chase across half the world, to arrive at this completely immoral and utterly preposterous place of Barkut! He had spent three weeks in jail! His conscience metaphorically wrung its hands. And now—now a slave-girl who showed her legs aroused his amorous fancy. Worse, a female *djinn* with no modesty whatever——.

Tony yawned. He felt somewhat apprehensive about the *djinnee* who said her name was Nasim, but he was certainly not allured. He was even almost grateful, because the slave-girl, Ghail, had been in the sort of rage a girl does not feel over the misdeeds of a man she cares nothing about. And Tony felt a very warm approval of Ghail. It was not only that she had nice legs. Oh, definitely not! He approved of many other things about her.

And besides that, she was a nice person. She treated him like an individual human being, and during all his life heretofore Tony had been surveyed as a possible date, or a possible husband if nothing better turned up, but rarely as a simple human being.

He turned over in bed. He was no longer in his cell, but in something like a bridal or royal suite in the palace. It was so huge that he felt a bit lonely. The ceiling of his bedroom was all of twenty feet tall, and arched, with those sculptured icicles he had seen in pictures of the Alhambra in Spain. The floor was of cool marble tiles, with rugs scattered here and there. The bed itself was hardly more than a pallet upon a stand of black wood ornamented in what certainly looked like gold. The coverings were silk. There was a pitcher of some cooling drink by his elbow, and if he pulled a silken bell-cord a slave would come in and pour it for him.

His position in Barkut had changed remarkably during the day. At the moment of the excitement over Nasim, Ghail had brought a chamberlain with a purple-dyed beard to explain that his imprisonment had been all a mistake. He had been mistaken for a *djinn*, disguised as human for the purpose of undesirable political activity within the city. Since he wasn't a *djinn*—and drinking the *lasf* proved he was not—and since he had told the girl, Ghail, that when he talked to the rulers he would be high in favor and rich . . . well, the rulers wanted to know what he had to offer in exchange for favor and riches. Also—Ghail had put in sullenly—if the king of the *djinns* of these parts had sent a *djinnee* at great risk into Barkut to beguile him, it was evident that the *djinn* also attached great importance to him. So the rulers of Barkut wanted to know why he had come to their city.

Tony had let himself be led to a great hall with zodiacal figures in brass carved into the black-marble floor. The throne of Barkut stood beneath its canopy against the far wall. It was empty. But there were six ancient men

seated on rugs before it, smoking water-pipes. They smoked and coughed and wheezed and looked unanimously unhappy and old and ineffective. But their red-rimmed eyes dwelt on the slave-girl before they turned to Tony, so he felt that there was some life in them yet.

They greeted him with fussy politeness and had him sit and then wheezingly asked him who he was, where he came from and what he wanted.

Ghail intervened before he could answer and explained that Tony had come from a far country, and that he had crossed the farthest ocean on a great flying bird. Tony had told her as much, lacking an exact Arabic term for a transatlantic plane or even for a converted four-motored bomber. He had traveled farther, Ghail added, in a boat of steel with fire in its inwards. This was a repetition of Tony's description of the somewhat decrepit steamer from Suez to Suakim. And these things, Ghail said firmly, she had believed to be lies from a more than usually stupid *djinn*, but since Tony was no *djinn* but a human, who was inexplicably sought after by the local *djinn* king, she believed them absolutely.

The six councilors smoked and coughed and made other noises common to elderly people. Tony opened his mouth to speak, and again the slave-girl forestalled him.

In his homeland, said Ghail truculently, Tony was of a rank second to none. This was her interpretation of his attempt to explain that nobody in America was of higher rank than he was, as a citizen. He was a prince, Ghail elaborated, journeying in quest of adventure and to see the peoples of the earth—an activity considered highly appropriate in princes. His nation had so subdued the *djinn* that they, the humans, rode in the air with ease and safety, and spoke to each other privately though a thousand miles apart, and traveled in personal vehicles with the power of forty and fifty and an hundred horses, and were mightier in war than any other people under the sun.

These statements also Tony had made in the course of

his language lessons. He had thought Ghail was impressed, then, and she was not an easy person to awe. But now she repeated them parrot-like, with a belligerent air as if daring anybody to question them. In short, she said, Tony was a very dangerous person. On the side of the *djinn*—and the king of the *djinn* had already tried to allure him by the charms of a *djinnee*—he would be dangerous to Barkut. Therefore he should either be secured as an ally of Barkut, or else executed immediately before he could set out to help the *djinn*.

Tony protested feebly.

“Did you not tell me that you were in the greatest of all wars?” Ghail demanded. “In which millions of humans were killed? Did you not say that your nation ended the war by destroying cities instantly, in flame hotter than the hottest fire?”

Tony had unquestionably mentioned atomic bombs. He had also said that he was in the war. He had not mentioned that he had spent it at a typewriter, of course—since Ghail would not know what a typewriter was. Of course!

“So you,” said the slave-girl firmly, “will swear by the beard of the Prophet to lead the armies of Barkut to victory over the *djinn*, or else—”

Ultimately he swore, gloomily, on a book with a binding of marvelously ornamented richness. It was a Koran, and he had never read it and did not believe its contents. More, he did not know what sort of beard the prophet had worn, so it could not be said that there was a meeting of minds, and possibly the contract was not really valid. But he felt an obligation, nevertheless. Late that night, unable to sleep, it recurred. The ancient men of the Council of Regents of Barkut had given him their confidence out of the direness of their need. The slave-girl, Ghail, counted on him, because there was no one else to turn to. The danger to Barkut from the *djinn*, he gathered, was extreme. The plant *lasf* was a protection against them,

but bullets merely stung them, and *lasf* grew constantly more difficult to come by. The *djinn* grew bolder and bolder as the humans in Barkut ran into the technological difficulties inherent in a shortage of *lasf*. The *djinn*, in fact, had become so bold that, four years previously, their local king had kidnapped the authentic queen of Barkut and now held her prisoner, which, Tony discovered, explained the empty throne and the Council of Regents. For some reason not clear to Tony, the ruler of Barkut could not actually be injured by a *djinn*, though her subjects were not so fortunate. Therefore the Queen's only sufferings were imprisonment and the ardent courtship of the *djinn* king. Still . . .

Lying wakeful in bed in the royal suite of the palace, Tony surveyed this statement of the situation with distrust. It sounded naive and improvable, like something out of the Arabian Nights. It was. Like all the events stemming from his purchase of a ten-dirhim piece in an antique-shop on West 45th Street, New York, it was so preposterous that he pinched himself for assurance that his present surroundings were real.

They were. His leg hurt like the devil. He rubbed it, scowling. Then he heard a thud on the windowsill of his bedroom. He got out of bed, suspicious. He went to the window. Nothing. It looked out upon a small garden designed for the occupants of this suite. There was grass and shrubbery and small trees and a fountain playing in the starlight. It smelled inviting. Beyond it lay the palace, and beyond that the city, and beyond the city was the oasis and the desert. And somewhere—somewhere unguessable—lay the dominions and the stronghold of the *djinns* beyond the desert.

His conscience wrung its hands. In the fix he was in, to be thinking about *djinns* and captive queens and such lunatic items! How about those fine plans for the import-export business between Barkut and New York? What had he learned about the commercial products of Barkut?

What was the possible market for American goods? If he went with no more than he now knew to an established firm in New York to get them to take up the matter, what information could he give them that would justify them in offering him an executive position? Why, if he'd only confined his attention to proper subjects like imports and exports instead of trying to rouse the romantic interest of a long-legged slave-girl, nobody would ever have thought of asking him to lead an army——.

Rubbing his leg where it hurt, he gazed out into the garden and rudely thrust his conscience aside. That garden looked romantic in the starlight. He wouldn't mind being out there right now with Ghail . . .

Something stirred on the windowsill almost beside his hand. He started, and in starting dislodged one of the soft silken cushions that were everywhere about this place. It fell to the floor. Then he saw a dark shape on the windowsill like a frog. He groped for a shoe to swat it with, and it jumped blindly into the room. It was a frog. He could tell by the way it jumped. But it landed with a cushioned, smacking "thud" such as no frog should make. It sounded like a couple of hundred pounds mashing a pillow flat and whacking against the floor beneath. The pillow, in fact, burst under the impact. Stray particles of stuffing flew here and there. More, from within the burst cushion came guttural swearing in a deep bass voice.

Then the split silken covering inflated and burst anew, and a swirling luminous mist congealed into a solid shape, and Tony found himself staring at an essentially human form. It had the most viciously developed arms and shoulders he had ever seen, though, and a chest like a barrel, and a wrestler's legs. Its head and face were of normal size, but it took no thought whatever to decide that the features were those of a *djinn*. The slanting, feral eyes, the tusks projecting slightly from between the lips, the pointed ears,—it was a *djinn*, all right, and a *djinn* in a terrible temper.

“Mortal!” it growled. “You art that strange prince who came across the desert!”

Tony swallowed.

“You art that creature, that mere human, who ensnared the love of Nasim, the jewel among *djinnees!*” raged the creature. It pounded its chest. “Know, mortal, that I am Es-Souk, her betrothed! I have come to tear you limb from limb!”

Tony’s conscience said acidly that it had told him so. He was not aware of any other mental process. He simply stared, open-mouthed. And the djinn leaped on him with incredible agility.

Sinewy, irresistibly powerful hands seized his throat. They tightened, and then relaxed while the *djinn* said gloatingly:

“You shall die slowly!”

Then they tightened again, bit by bit. The *djinn*, for this enterprise, had undoubtedly modeled the shape he had assumed upon a champion human wrestler, with improvements. And Tony had not, lately taken any systematic exercise greater than that of punching the buttons in an automat restaurant. It was not adequate preparation for hand-to-hand conflict with a *djinn*. He clawed at the strangling hands with complete futility. Then a strange calmness came to him. Perhaps it was resignation. Possibly it was a lurking unbelief of the reality of his experiences, lingering in the back of his mind. But being strangled, even if it were illusion, was extremely uncomfortable. He remembered a part of the basic combat training he had received before being assigned to sit at a typewriter for the glory of his country’s flag. An axiom of that training was that nobody can strangle you if you only keep your head. All you have to do——.

Tony did it. Because being strangled is painful.

He reached up with both hands and in each hand took one—just one—of the *djinn*’s sinewy fingers. One complete human hand is stronger than a single finger even

of a *djinn*. Tony bent the single finger ruthlessly backward. Something cracked.

The *djinn* howled. The noise was that of a steam-whistle. Tony hastily repeated the process. Something else cracked. The *djinn* roared, and let go. There were dim shoutings and rushings in the corridors of the palace. But Tony remained alone, gasping for breath, in the high-ceilinged room with this creature who said that he was Es-Souk the betrothed of Nasim. At this time Tony remembered Nasim only as a beaming misty face and a pudgy human figure which was exclusively pink skin. breast and bellowing.

Tony coughed. His throat hurt, and he had been half-strangled. He coughed again, rackingly.

The monstrous and now unhuman bellowing figure sneezed. The blast of air practically knocked Tony off his feet. Then Es-Souk uttered cries which were suddenly bellowings of terror. He sneezed again, and the silken bed-sheets flapped crazily to the far corners of the room.

Then the *djinn's* figure melted swiftly into a dark whirlwind which poured through the window. There were poundings on the door, but Tony paid no attention to them, as he crossed groggily to the window and stared out.

A shape fled in panic among the stars. It was a whirlwind of dark smakiness, but the stars were very bright. The whirlwind, which was the *djinn* Es-Souk, fled in mortal terror—or perhaps immortal terror—from the vicinity of the palace of Barkut. And as it fled, it paused and underwent a truly terrific convulsion. Lightings flashed in it. Thunder roared in it. The whole sky and the countryside was lighted by the flashings.

When a whirlwind sneezes, the results are impressive.

To be Continued