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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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Contents for February, 1930

- Cover Design Hugh Rankin
Illustrating a scene in "Thirsty Blades"
- The Eyrie 148
A chat with the readers
- Shadows Clark Ashton Smith 154
Verse
- Thirsty Blades Otis A. Kline and E. Hoffmann Price 156
A swift-moving tale of the devil-worshippers of Kurdistan, and the colossal issues that hung upon the clash of blades
- The Comet-Drivers Edmond Hamilton 172
From the void of space it came, a cosmic vampire looting the lives of universes—a weird-scientific novelette

[CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE]

[CONTINUED FROM PRECEDING PAGE]

- The Black Monarch (Part 1)**-----**Paul Ernst** 193
A stupendous five-part serial story of incarnate evil—a tale of an unthinkable doom hanging over mankind
- The Curse Kiss**-----**Theodore Roscoe** 223
An unusual story is this—a tale about Lot's wife, who was turned into a pillar of salt
- Piecemeal**-----**Oscar Cook** 232
A grim, powerful story of a weird crime—a fearful fate befell Mendingham on a London houseboat
- Behind the Moon (Conclusion)**-----**W. Elwyn Backus** 239
A three-part weird-scientific serial story of eery perils and blood-freezing horrors encountered on the moon
- The Daughter of Isis**-----**Hal K. Wells** 250
This exquisite story of the beautiful Zhanthores, who could not die through the ages, breathes the spirit of old Egypt
- At Eventide**-----**Hanna Baird Campbell** 258
Verse
- The Falling Knife**-----**Harold Markham** 259
Meuriere promised Piron to save his sweetheart from the guillotine—a weird story of the French Revolution
- The Lilac Bush**-----**August W. Derleth** 265
A very brief tale—the children were unjustly blamed for the picking of the lilacs
- The Horror on Dagoth Wold**-----**Frank Belknap Long, Jr.** 267
Verse
- The Fearsome Touch of Death**-----**Robert E. Howard** 268
Ghastly was the fear that gripped the man in the silence and darkness—a blood-chilling story
- Weird Story Reprint:**
- A Ghost**-----**Guy de Maupassant** 283
A tale of the supernatural by one of the most famous of French story-tellers

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The DAUGHTER of ISIS BY HALK WELLS



"He entered the soft embrace of slim ivory arms, in a riotous madness such as only the gods should know."

I WAS utterly at ease and very well satisfied with both myself and the world as I sprawled there in the big easy chair before the open fire in my bachelor apartment.

I had just returned from an excellent dinner. It was some little time yet before I was due at the home of Alice Worthing, my fiancée. I settled down in the big chair for a comfortable smoke.

My cigarette glowed warmly in its holder. As the smoke curled upward in the dimly lighted room, through half-closed eyelids I lazily conjured up visions of Alice in the fad way that a young man very much in love is apt to do. I visualized the soft sheen of her amber hair, the crystal clearness of the blue in her eyes, the utterly adorable dimple that lurked

in the satin smoothness of her cheek.

Then abruptly, without a second's warning, She came—a vision as amazingly different from the serene beauty of Alice as night is from day.

It was only for the barest fraction of a minute that the stranger's face appeared in the gray cloud of cigarette smoke just before my eyes, yet so vivid was the exotic beauty of her face that its every detail lingered in my memory for hours—the lambent depths of the large dark eyes; the warm, alluring lips; the strangely fascinating dusky pallor of the skin, as of very delicately tinted old ivory.

There was something strange and alien in the face—in the odd, almost Oriental slant of the almond eyes; in the rather high cheek-bones; in the unfamiliar, barbaric beauty of the

jeweled crescent-and-globe emblem on the rich head-dress which fitted snugly down over the straight lustrous black hair.

So startlingly vivid was the vision that when it abruptly vanished a moment later I blinked my eyes in dazed bewilderment and peered half fearfully about the room as though expecting to find some barbaric princess there in the flesh. There was no one there, of course. I set the odd happening down as being merely a weird trick of an over-active imagination.

But later in the evening, after I had arrived at Alice Worthing's home, I found the memory of that fascinating face with the strange oblique eyes and the warm alluring lips kept looming up in my mind with an impish persistence. So obvious did my preoccupation become that Alice at last commented upon it.

"What is the matter with you tonight, Frank?" she asked curiously. "You are not looking at me at all. You just sit there staring into space as though at any moment you expected to see—oh, I don't know what!"

I managed a fairly convincing apology about too much work of late. For the rest of the evening I succeeded in keeping my mind where it belonged.

The next day proved a busy one for the law office in which I was one of the junior partners, and I had no time to brood over visions, pleasant or otherwise. I took some of the work home to my apartment to finish that night.

With papers spread all over my study table I was soon thoroughly engrossed in my work. It was nearly an hour later when, like a fragrant breath from some suddenly opened perfume-container, I abruptly became aware of a new and singularly pleasant aroma mingling with the tobacco fumes in the room—a strange, exotic scent in which sandalwood, myrrh,

orris and a dozen other Oriental perfumes seemed blended in a bizarre fragrance.

I looked quickly up from my work. Looming vividly in the gray cigarette smoke just before my eyes was the face again, with vibrant life glowing in every exquisite line of its softly oval contour.

There was an odd expression in the lustrous depths of those great dark eyes, a strange sweet pleading that I could not understand, yet which I felt in every fiber of my being. For a full minute the face lingered there so close to my own in the smoke-filled air.

When it finally vanished it left me oddly shaken. I found it hard to convince myself that there was not something more behind the affair than any mere prank of overworked nerves.

I did no more work that evening. My dreams when I finally fell asleep were queerly jumbled mosaics of jeweled crescent-and-globe emblems, the perfume of sandalwood, and glorious eyes set oddly oblique beneath finely arched brows.

In the calm, matter-of-fact routine of our office the next morning I found myself still remembering the vivid vision of the night before. I finally resolved to put the matter to a definite test that evening. I would deliberately court the vision. If it did not appear, then I would know that the whole thing had been merely a trick of frayed nerves. If it did appear again—well, the experiment would then be all the more interesting.

I RETURNED to my apartment immediately after dinner. Alice Worthing had gone out of town for a two days' trip, and the entire evening was my own. As nearly as I could remember them, I exactly duplicated the conditions that had preceded the vision's first appearance. With the living-room of my apartment dimly

lighted by a shaded bridge-lamp over in the corner, I settled myself comfortably in the big easy chair before the fire. Then, with fingers that trembled a little in spite of myself, I placed a cigarette in the holder.

I had a queer intangible feeling almost of dread, as though I were being warned against carrying my experiment any farther lest I tamper with things and with forces that had far better be left unknown. I dismissed this feeling with an impatient shrug of my shoulders, and touched a match to my cigarette.

Again the gray smoke curled upward in lazy spirals. I hesitated for one breathless moment. Then, closing my eyes, I concentrated every ounce of my will in calling the exotic stranger back to me. I knew even as my will sent my wordless invitation out into space that it was being answered—answered with a swift exultant eagerness that startled me in spite of myself.

There was a sudden surge of the strange Oriental perfume until it seemed fairly to fill the room. I opened my eyes.

And there She was, standing before me, no mere face floating in air this time but a complete and gloriously perfect woman. From the crescent-and-globe in her jeweled head-dress to the silver sandals on her tiny aristocratic feet She was as utterly and maddeningly beautiful as any woman could ever be. Her barbaric, richly ornamented costume revealed more than it hid of the lissome grace of that superb body.

She was a living flame of desire, a flame which called to every yearning fiber of my being.

"Beloved, you called and I am here," she said simply in a voice that carried all the sweet husky resonance of muted temple bells. She raised her arms to me as though to welcome me to their ivory embrace.

I struggled dazedly to my feet. Dreading lest I touch only the empty

air, I stretched trembling hands toward the glorious figure who stood so near me. An instant later my fingers closed over her hands, and as I felt the warmth of those slender fingers I realized with a sudden mighty thrill of incredulous joy that this was no mere vision molded from empty air. This was a living woman!

Then I entered the soft embrace of those slim ivory arms and, with an ecstasy coursing through my veins in a riotous madness such as only the gods should know, I clasped her yielding form to mine until the very beating of her heart seemed to mingle with my own.

I looked down deep into those superb dark eyes, and now I understood the plea that flamed in their depths. Our lips met in a long kiss of such strange and overwhelming sweetness that my senses reeled, and time ceased to exist.

Then suddenly my arms clasped only empty air. I was alone again. I had a queer feeling that I had only to call and She would return to me again, but I did not call. For the first time since I began my experiment I found myself actually frightened.

Because I now knew that She was no mere figment of the imagination. She was an eery visitant from an alien world, a strange eldritch world into which no sane man should ever venture if he valued his soul.

Sleep was a torture that night. My every sense yearned to feel again the sweet embrace of those slender ivory arms and to rain kisses upon those warm lips again. I had to fight with the last scrap of my will-power to keep from again calling the exotic wearer of the crescent-and-globe to me.

I struggled somehow through my work at the office the next day, dreading what the evening might bring yet at the same time eagerly looking forward to it. When I rose from dinner in the restaurant I was

firmly resolved to spend the next three or four hours in the security of a theater. But even as I left the restaurant doors I found that I was in the grip of a power stronger than my will. My footsteps inevitably led back to the solitude of my apartment.

And there, in the semi-darkness of my dimly lighted living-room, I fought a battle such as few mortal men have ever fought. I at last realized the full extent of the weird peril that I had so rashly brought upon myself.

I no longer needed to call to bring my exotic visitant to me. I could feel her presence there constantly at my side, yearning, pleading to be allowed to appear before me in the flesh again. Knowing that it was only the barrier that I was erecting by sheer will-power that kept her from appearing in a tangible form, I fought to keep that barrier firm.

But it was a losing fight. Even though I knew the terrible folly of yielding again to the phantom's damnable lure, my will slowly crumbled under that insidious onslaught. At last there came the time when my resistance collapsed completely.

For one delirious soul-stirring moment I again surrendered to the yearning embrace of those exquisite arms and again crushed those warm alluring lips to mine.

It was only for an instant. Then with a mighty effort that drained my last reserve of will-power I succeeded in dismissing her back to that eldritch unseen world from which She had come. But my victory was a hollow one. I knew, and She knew, that the time was perilously near when I would yield myself utterly to her mad love even though it meant my irrevocable doom, both body and soul.

THE effort of that last struggle exhausted me so utterly that I slept. I again dragged myself down to the office, though I knew that any effort

at work would be little more than a joke.

I refused to cudgel my weary brain over the problem any longer. I was too dazed and bewildered from the unbelievable things that had happened to me since the sinisterly beautiful visitant from the unknown had first broken the even tenor of my life. I could not fight against that strange, terrible lure forever. I knew within my heart that when evening came again it would in all probability bring with it my final and utter surrender.

For the first time, I really understood how a moth must feel when it heedlessly hurls itself headlong into the beckoning flame, gladly enduring the searing agony for the sake of the brief instant of glorious ecstasy that the fiery embrace must bring.

The hours dragged endlessly. I found myself looking forward to evening with an ever-growing eagerness. Then late in the afternoon Alice Worthing phoned me, asking me to come over that evening.

Her familiar voice brought me back to my senses with the swift welcome release of a sudden gust of cold pure air that awakens a struggling dreamer from some eery nightmare. I dismissed all thought of the exotic wearer of the crescent-and-globe, and again became a normal man in a normal wholesome world.

As I rose from my dinner table in the restaurant that night I felt again the urge to return to my apartment. A pair of great lustrous eyes, slightly oblique beneath their finely arched brows, seemed to glow for an instant there in the air before me, the lambent flame in their depths pleading and beckoning. I dismissed their message almost contemptuously.

So easy was my victory that it seemed incredible that I had fallen such easy prey to that phantom lure the evening before. I went directly to Alice Worthing's home.

There for the next hour I fairly

reveled in the companionship of the girl who had been my sweetheart since we were children together. We were more than sweethearts. We were pals and comrades with a deep and perfect love which only years of genuine understanding can bring.

I came to Alice's comforting arms with the thankful relief of a small boy who has been badly scared by the dark. Alice, as always, understood my mood. Her cool slender fingers caressed my forehead with a soothing gentleness that slowly brought peace to my troubled soul.

Then with ghastly abruptness my dream of security was shattered. A sudden overpowering surge of that too-familiar Oriental perfume swept into the room until it seemed to fill the air with cloying, sinister fragrance. And She stood there beside me, looking down upon us with a faintly contemptuous smile. Without a word She stretched forth beckoning arms to me.

Alice looked up, startled, as I leaped to my feet and confronted the intruder from the unknown. To my amazement I could see from the expression upon Alice's face that for her eyes the weirdly beautiful apparition did not even exist!

The wearer of the crescent-and-globe flung those perfectly molded arms about my neck.

"Beloved, no one can ever take you from me," she told me softly in that sweetly husky voice as of muted temple bells. "You are mine, mine alone!"

Alice's amazed voice broke in upon my ears.

"Why, Frank, what in the world has happened to you? You stand there almost as though you were embracing someone—listening to someone—talking to someone. Yet there is not a soul there but you! You almost frighten me."

Her voice shattered the spell for the moment. Sinking back on the divan I buried my face in my trem-

bling hands. God! what was this ghastly spell with which I seemed to be cursed? A perfume that was detected by no senses but my own, a voice that only I could hear, a sinister beauty that only I could see, and a vibrant body that only I could touch!

The next hour there in that pleasant living-room was a weird nightmare. No longer was She dependent upon my will to appear. She came without my wishing it, and remained against my will.

I fought to return to the wholesome sanity of our companionship before She came, but it was impossible. Always She stood there beside me, beckoning, alluring. Always her face came between me and Alice, her oblique eyes shining with the knowledge that I was powerless to dismiss her. Her warm lips returned to mine again and again, and I shuddered as I felt the dangerously sweet thrill of their mad kisses.

Alice was bewildered and frightened at what must have seemed little short of insanity in my actions as I struggled vainly against that eldritch presence. At last I could stand it no longer. With a hastily muttered apology I left the Worthing home and fled into the night.

I walked the streets like a madman. Always I felt the presence there beside me and I cursed her as I fled, for now I realized fully what her unholy love was doing to me. It was costing me the one thing I held dearest in life—the perfect love that had existed between Alice Worthing and me. And I was utterly powerless—as helpless as a child in the power of those unknown forces with which I had so foolishly tampered!

I MUST have walked for hours when a lighted shop window revealed something that stopped me abruptly. It was a picture there in the dusty window, but a picture that no sane artist should ever have painted.

For it was She who had been his model. The unknown artist had caught her terrible beauty with breath-taking reality. The great oblique eyes fairly blazed their beckoning lure from the painted canvas.

The store was the curio shop of Old Levine, a strange character with whom I had had some slight dealings before. It was odd that the little shop should be open at this late hour of the night, but it offered a last ray of hope at which I clutched eagerly.

Old Levine calmly looked up from the ancient manuscript over which he had been poring when I entered. His somber eyes set far back in their bony sockets brought to me the same icy shock of numbing dread that they had on several occasions before. That wrinkled yellow face, with its dry leathery skin stretched drum-tight over gaunt cheek-bones, was so utterly and incredibly old! It was old with the terrible age of one who has so long defied Death that he has at last forgotten how to die.

Old Levine followed my fascinated gaze to the picture in the window. He cackled in sudden recognition and understanding as his eyes turned back to me.

"Ah, so it is you, is it, my fine young man?" he greeted me. "It is a pleasure to see you again. I have been expecting you."

"You have been expecting me?" I repeated dazedly.

"Yes, ever since I sold you the Zhanthores papyrus several days ago."

"But you sold me no papyrus!" I protested.

"You probably did not recognize it as such. It was a part of the queer little cigarette-holder you liked so well."

I remembered the cigarette-holder then. Taking it from my pocket, I looked at it more closely. It was an odd little piece whose quaint form had irresistibly appealed to me the moment that I first saw it. At the

time I had thought that the two-inch-wide light band around the middle of the cylinder was old ivory inset upon the wood. But now I saw that it was indeed a small and very fine papyrus that had been glued completely around the holder, then varnished over with some transparent lacquer. Its surface was nearly covered with tiny hieroglyphic symbols which meant nothing whatever to my unschooled eye.

"That papyrus has seen many strange resting-places throughout the centuries," Old Levine cackled. "It has decorated the enameled top of a cavalier's jewel box; it has been worn in the helmet of one of Richard's knights; it has been an amulet suspended around the neck of a young Roman centurion; it has been set in the heavy bracelet of an Indian prince; it has even been locked in the hollow hilt of a viking chieftain's sword. For it must always be among the intimate personal possessions of its owner if he is to become one of Zhanthores' countless lovers."

"Do you mean to tell me," I interrupted the old man incredulously, "that this tiny piece of papyrus has been the means of bringing upon me the terrible attentions of that woman—or Thing—that you call Zhanthores?"

"Oh, she is a woman all right," Old Levine assured me, "and such a woman as this dull planet has seldom seen. You need not be ashamed of being numbered among Zhanthores' lovers. In the three thousand years and more since she was buried with mystic rites in her strange tomb beside the Nile she has numbered kings, princes, and even emperors among the ever-growing lists of her lovers."

"No, it is no disgrace to be loved by Zhanthores," Old Levine went on. "It is a mad ecstasy that is given to few mortals to know. Zhanthores, Daughter of Isis, she was called back in the days when she lived as other mortals live, and trod with dainty

sandals among the lush grasses that grew then in the valley of the Nile." Old Levine's tones were oddly reminiscent. I shuddered as a sudden impression swept over me that those somber eyes of his had actually looked upon those lush grasses that grew in the Egyptian valley thirty centuries and more ago.

"She was the sister of Xilor, High Priest of Isis," the old man's voice droned on, "and so adept did she herself become in the magic of Isis and Osiris, mightiest of all Egyptian deities, that she became known as the Daughter of Isis. Zhanthores loved for the sweet mad sake of love itself. She could not bear to face the thought of the time when age must rob her of her glorious beauty and bar forever to her the gates of love.

"And so it is said that she made a strange and terrible bargain with Isis, Goddess of the Moon. In return for the magic papyrus, Zhanthores sold to Isis her body and her soul. It is in token of that bargain that even today Zhanthores wears upon her brow the crescent-and-globe symbol of Isis.

"Isis claimed Zhanthores in death. Her beautiful body was buried with strange rites in a secret tomb by Xilor and a chosen few of the highest adepts of the cult. And it is from that tomb, never since found by man, that Zhanthores' spirit has roamed abroad through the passing centuries, with the papyrus the key that opens for her the doors to the never-ending love for which she eternally hungers.

"The papyrus passes from hand to hand in the world of mortals, though it has never been relinquished by one of its owners until Death has stricken his name from the lists of Zhanthores' conquests. No matter in what trinket the papyrus may for the moment be embodied, it always exercises an irresistible lure for young men who are already in love. They possess it, and its possession seals

their doom. Zhanthores can appear only to the owner of the papyrus. At first, she can not even return to him again unless he wills it. But once he has called her and has known the terrible mad joy of Zhanthores' kiss, he is forever hers."

Zhanthores, Daughter of Isis, dead three thousand years yet still roaming the world of living men and bringing to her hapless victims a love such as no mortal man should ever taste, a love in which the rapture of paradise and the agonies of hell flamed side by side! Old Levine's tale was incredible, mad. Yet, looking into the brooding depths of his somber eyes, I believed him.

"I have already known Zhanthores' kiss," I admitted. "But surely there must be some way in which I can still break this hellish spell? The papyrus was in your possession once and yet you are unscathed. I am sure you can help me—if you will!"

"The papyrus has been in my possession many times," Old Levine agreed. "I am immune. It is useless to tell you why. It is an immunity to which you could never attain in a dozen lifetimes. Your only hope of release is to destroy the papyrus. It can be destroyed only by fire, and even then only if its owner really wishes in his soul to destroy it. If he still yearns for Zhanthores and longs to feel again the ecstasy of her kiss, however, the papyrus will not even be charred though the coals under it may burn to ashes.

"Thus far the papyrus has proved indestructible through the ages. If you are able to destroy it you will not only win freedom from her power over you, but you will forever destroy Zhanthores as well. But I warn you that you are attempting a task at which a thousand men have failed. The papyrus has been thrown on the flames countless times, but no man who has once known Zhanthores' kiss has ever been able, when the

final test has come, to relinquish her."

Old Levine would tell me no more, in spite of my pleading. I left the shop and for hours I again tramped the deserted streets, trying to numb my seething brain by sheer physical exertion. And always I felt the presence of Zhanthores at my side, beckoning, waiting.

DAWN came, and with it I felt the presence of the Daughter of Isis no longer. Returning to my apartment, I spent the entire day in a dead sleep of utter physical exhaustion. It was dark when I awoke. Though the wearer of the crescent-and-globe was not visible as yet, the room was already beginning to fill with the exotic Egyptian perfume.

I grimly resolved to fight my last battle against that eery spirit then and there. I hurriedly piled stick after stick on the fire in the grate until I had a leaping mass of flames. I had to nerve myself as for some mighty physical effort before I finally succeeded in flinging the cigarette-holder into the very heart of the fire.

The flames licked hungrily at the dry wood and parchments. In an instant the wooden part of the cylinder was ablaze. Then I felt my attention suddenly and irresistibly drawn away from the fireplace. There beside me stood Zhanthores, ivory arms outstretched toward me, her glorious eyes beckoning to me, every line of that superbly beautiful body calling me to her. I strove dazedly to visualize Alice Worthing, to remember the wholesome joys of a normal world that I was forever renouncing; but the effort was hopeless.

I sprang to my feet, with the mad exotic lure of the Daughter of Isis sweeping through my veins like liquid fire. I yielded, utterly and completely, and again in the savage joy of Zhanthores' kisses I was fellow to the gods themselves.

I realized that I was sealing my

own doom, but I cared not. My career as Zhanthores' lover might be a brief one before the fires of that terrible love inevitably consumed me, but its short span would at least be one of sheer mad ecstasy!

The fire in the grate burned to smoldering ashes. The wooden part of the cigarette-holder had long been consumed, but the papyrus still remained there in its fiery bed unscathed.

IT MAY have been minutes later, or it may have been hours, that the insistent ringing of my telephone tore me reluctantly from the perfumed embrace of the Daughter of Isis. It was Alice Worthing on the line.

No longer did her voice have any power to awaken me from the eldritch passion to which I had fallen victim. Nothing mattered to my crazed brain now but Zhanthores and the vibrant kisses of her warm lips. But Alice's worried voice did awaken in me enough of a last lingering spark of decency so that I resolved to pay her a final visit and, as gently as I could, explain to her that our engagement could no longer mean anything to me.

I gingerly fished the uncharred papyrus out of the ashes of the grate and replaced it in my pocket. Then I left for the Worthing home.

And there, seated beside Alice on a divan in front of the open grate fire in the big comfortable living-room, I tried to bring myself to telling my childhood sweetheart the thing that I knew would break her heart.

Alice could not smell the exotic perfume that filled the room, nor could she see the eerily beautiful figure of Zhanthores sitting there languidly in a big chair beside us, watching the proceedings with a confident, mocking smile.

But Alice did know that something was very much wrong, and her eyes

had almost an expression of fear in them as she raised them to mine.

It was then that the miracle happened.

It was a miracle that was born in the depths of those clear blue eyes, a miracle that swept the vapors of my mad delirium away like swamp mists before the warm morning sun. For in Alice's eyes I read a love and devotion so great, a love so normal and clean and wholesome, that its overwhelming tenderness would have recalled a man from the brink of the Pit itself.

I knew with a mighty rush of exultant joy that deliverance for me was at hand. I snatched the papyrus of Zhanthores from my pocket and hurled it into the fire in the grate. Then I clasped Alice tenderly to me and pressed her sweet cool lips to mine.

There was a lurid flash of ruddy

flame from the grate. My heart sang within me. The papyrus was burning, burning, for this time I was willing its destruction with every last shred of my soul.

I caught a final glimpse of Zhanthores, a glimpse that sickened me. For, as she writhed there in her chair in what seemed to be an unearthly torment, that glorious beauty of hers was fading with an incredible and horrible speed. She was now an old crone, almost corpse-like in her ghastly, age-ravaged features. There was one awful final glimpse of a gibbering skeleton form; then even that vanished.

The bizarre perfume was swiftly fading from the air. The papyrus had crumbled to feathery ashes in the grate.

I clasped Alice to me more tightly. I was free.

Zhanthores was gone—forever!