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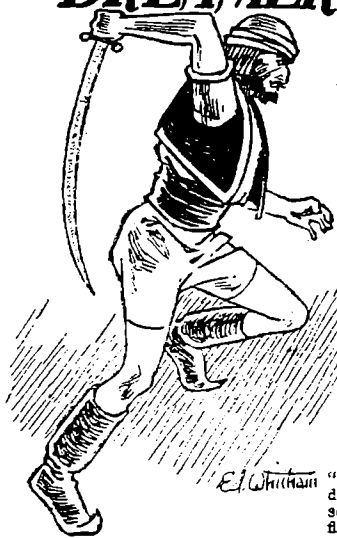
WEIRD TALES

400 Holiday Building

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The DREAMER of ATLÂNÂAT

by E. Hoffmann Price



E. Hoffmann Price "With a hoarse, strangled yell, Isfendiyar leaped forward, wrenching himself from his vision. The simitar flamed wide and swiftly."

ISMAIL the chief wazir sat at the foot of his master's dais, reading from the chronicles of that great prince, the adornment of Islam, who had reigned magnificently in far-off Balkh nine hundred years ago.

"A horse and a robe of honor for Giaffar al Barmaki, the Grand Wazir, the friend of the Calif, 40,000 dinars of gold."

And then a few lines farther down was another entry, dated several days later: "Reeds and naphtha for burning the body of the traitor Giaffar, four dirhems of silver."

And Ismail smiled; for as it was then, so could it be today: nine hundred years were but as a mist that obscured, rather than a hand that changed. Ismail smiled, and again read to himself of the swift fate that befell the friend of that just prince, nine hundred years ago in Balkh . . .

a horse and a robe of honor . . . naphtha and reeds. . . Yes, and Haaj Isfendiyar, was he not the friend of the sultan, and the enemy of Ismail?

Giaffar al Barmaki, friend of the just calif, had had an enemy. . .

After ten years of high adventure, ten years of intrigue and device, Haaj Isfendiyar was able to pause for a moment's respite, look back over the turbulent days of his ascent from obscurity, and contemplate the world from the shadow of the sultan's favor. And as he sat there in the guardroom of the palace of Angor-lana, a little apart from his subordinates, as became the friend of the sultan and captain of a thousand horse, he relaxed long enough to stroke his curled black beard and feast himself on reminiscence.

Ten years . . . ten years ago it was that a lean, hard-eyed young fellow

with a nose like the beak of a bird of prey had sought audience of the sultan; sought, and gained audience, ragged and grimy as he was.

"And where did you get that sword?" queried the sultan, eyeing the glittering scabbard and belt and embroidered pouch that were so out of keeping with the ragged garments and the unwashed wanderer whose erect form they inclosed.

"I inherited them from an emir in Kurdistan," replied the youth, returning the sultan's stare, "along with his horse and other belongings."

"So! You lie as readily as you plundered . . . though perhaps you did inherit as a self-appointed heir . . . well, not bad at all; you should attain a high post at court. By the way, do you speak Persian?"

"No, my lord. But there are Persian verses on the blade of my simitar."

And to prove it, he unsheathed the weapon: a serious breach of etiquette, this drawing of arms in the sultan's presence, and at times a fatal error. The fan-bearers behind the throne ceased fanning long enough to watch the bungler's head roll across the tiled floor. But the sultan smiled, and the youth's head remained on his shoulders.

"Very good." Then, to the captain of the guard, "Nourredin, here is a recruit for you. Instruct him, and at sunset post him at El Azir. And learn to speak Persian, young fellow!"

Again the son of the old tiger of Angor-lana smiled. And so likewise did the captain, and also the fan-bearers. This, then, was the sultan's gentle, jesting way of disposing of one so ignorant of court etiquette as to draw a weapon in the Presence!

At noon the next day, when the captain and his men rode to inspect the outposts, they saw vultures hovering high over El Azir. But upon

drawing nearer, they saw that the wanderer still rode his beat; still on post, but mounted on a different horse, a silver-white stallion of the princely desert breed.

Between the vultures and the jackals, the bones of the recruit's assailants had become hopelessly intermingled.

And from that day on, the wanderer's rise was rapid.

Thinking of all this, Haaj Isfendiyar smiled, and stroked his curled beard, and contemplated the world from the shadow of the sultan's favor. And then he nodded gravely to the wazir Ismail, his enemy, whose approach interrupted his play of reminiscence.

"*Es salaam aleika!*" he greeted.

"And with you, exceeding peace, Haaji," returned the wazir. "My horse is in your stables, and the arms we wagered on the race have been left at your house. And here is the purse we agreed upon," concluded Ismail, offering a heavy pouch, completing the payment of a ruinous wager.

"Which leaves you even as I was ten years ago, save that I had arms and a horse, inherited from an emir. The gold I will keep; but go back and take your goods, and your horse also."

"You are generous as Hatim Tai," acknowledged Ismail.

"It is nothing," countered Isfendiyar.

For, serene in the shadow of the sultan's friendship, he forgot for an instant that magnanimity adds to instead of detracting from enmity, forgot that the poet had counseled, "Yield naught to your foe, were he Rustum, the son of Zal. . ."

"You have a trick, Haaji, of inheriting arms and horses. May I examine that poniard?" requested Ismail.

"And why not?"

"A remarkable weapon, Haaji. Doubtless it has not mate, but is truly matchless?"

"It had a mate. But I lost it several years ago. And then I had my name inlaid on the blade of the remaining one."

"Wondrous workmanship," commented Ismail, returning the weapon.

Isfendiyar had poured himself a glass of Shirazi, twisted his mustache, and thought fondly of the emir whose heir he was. And thus it was that he did not note that the poniard which he received from Ismail was not the one bearing his own name, Isfendiyar, but rather its long-lost mate, identical to the line, save only that its blade was not engraved.

LATE that evening, the wazir Ismail sought the sultan, who had just completed his plans for the next day's administration.

"My lord, do not walk in the gardens tonight, as is your custom."

"And why not?"

"There is one who will seek you with a knife."

The wazir handed the sultan a sheet of paper.

"I found this note of warning among the petitions given me to submit to you at today's audience. As you will note, it is anonymous; but there may be truth in it. I withheld it, for I did not wish to distract you before the day's work was done."

"And so you would have me hide because someone threatens?"

"I was about to suggest that my lord permit me to act as a decoy, for we are of the same status. And some members of the guard could await in concealment, so that we could trap the assassin."

"And have it known that I hide in my house and fear to walk in my own gardens?" flared the sultan. "Nonsense! I will go at the usual hour!"

"But——"

"Enough! You may leave."

And Ismail departed, knowing well that further argument with the hot-headed prince would be wasted.

"Beeds and naphtha, four dirhems of silver," he murmured to himself, as he left the Presence.

The sultan divested himself of his outer garment, donned a shirt of fine-linked mail, proof alike against pistol or knife, and then, once more dressed, he scrutinized the fine Persian script of the warning note.

"If this is indeed in good faith, I shall meet and settle once for all with whoever seeks me tonight; and if it is a hoax," reasoned the sultan, "then at least the writer shall not have the satisfaction of saying that a son of the old tiger kept to his house like a frightened child."

He smiled sourly, unfolded and re-read the letter. From the city wall came the challenge of a sentry as he halted the new relief. It was time for the sultan's promenade, time to meet the assassin.

ONCE out in the garden, the hunted prince strolled as was his custom, with the nonchalance, the careless bearing of a monarch who seeks a moment's respite from the cares of state. Careless indeed he seemed as he flicked his cigarette into the pool of a fountain that sprayed mistily in the moonlight, paused to examine a small plane-tree, planted with his own hands; but beneath this pose of relaxation were the tense nerves of him who stalks the tiger.

"A hoax, no doubt . . . and if I ever find the perpetrator, Saoud will spend the rest of the day wiping up spilled blood. Still——"

There was a snap of steel tested beyond its endurance. The sultan pitched forward a step, recovered, whirled, drew his pistol, and fired at the maddened form of his assailant, who was just clearing the garden wall. But moonlight and the swiftly

moving target proved too much for the sultan's marksmanship. The would-be assassin made good his escape.

The sultan shrugged his bruised shoulder.

"Well, but that was real enough."

And then at his feet he saw the poniard which, meeting the tough shirt of mail, had snapped at the hilt, Picking up the pieces, the sultan sought the private apartments of his palace. From a great distance came the thump-thump of atabals, the pulsing of drums that spoke of revolt in the hills.

"Treason within and revolt without! Bah!" He spat disgustedly. "And to think that I left the joys of Feringhistan to inherit this house of madness! Fool that I was to decline the offer of that infidel who would have bought my entire kingdom . . . an expensive coffin."

And thus and thus soliloquized the sultan as he picked his way through the dark corridors of his palace, and up the winding stairs to the roof. There, in the full light of the moon he scrutinized the shattered weapon the assassin had dropped in his flight.

"Marvelous good taste," he reflected, noting the adamantine splendor of the diamond-encrusted pommel, and the cool, unblinking blue of Burmese sapphires on the hilt. "A pity it had to break. . . Allah! Am I utterly mad?" he gasped.

"Isfendiyar, the son of Mamoun," he read in letters of gold inlay on the blade.

The sultan's features became drawn and haggard. His shoulders drooped. With head bowed, he paced back and forth, seeking to collect his scattered wits.

"You, Isfendiyar, my good friend . . . accused by friendship and all friends! . . . you, Isfendiyar, the son of Mamoun, you seek my life because

that fierce old man my father saw fit to jest, and doomed your father to death!"

And below, in the courtyard of the palace, from time to time the watch was changed; and now and then from the hills came the sinister drumming that spoke of revolt. But of all this the sultan was unaware; unaware of all save that Isfendiyar, his good friend, was indeed the son of that Mamoun of the great house of Idris, whom the old sultan had sent to his doom: and that for all these years Isfendiyar had plotted vengeance, failing only on account of an anonymous warning.

On all this the sultan pondered, admitting the justice of Isfendiyar's claim. Why should not one of the noble race of Idris seek just reprisal? And then came the memory of their friendship, and the bread they had broken, and the salt with which it had been seasoned.

The false dawn glowed on the horizon. And still the sultan paced to and fro, torn by conflicting thoughts of vengeance, pardon, wrath, and regret. An hour passed, and the true dawn flared forth. Still the sultan was entangled in his indecision.

The muezzin in the high minaret of the mosque intoned his call to prayer; and to its cadence the sultan chanted his oath of vengeance.

"You, Isfendiyar, my friend who sought me with a dagger, holding me accountable for the evil deed of my father. . ."

And then it dawned upon him that it was too late for reprisal; for surely the would-be assassin had ridden that very night back into the desert whence he came ten years ago. Inconsistently enough, the sultan rejoiced that the shock of the night's encounter and subsequent discovery had so benumbed his usually active brain that he had let Isfendiyar make good his escape.

"*Bismillahi rrahmani rrahheem* —" he began, as he faced the east. "Praise be to God, lord of the worlds. . ."

THAT morning in the hall of audience the wazir Ismail noted the sultan's hard features and knew without asking that there had been a meeting in the garden.

"My lord," he announced, "Haaaj Isfendiyar seeks audience with you."

"Impossible!" And then, to himself, "Fool! Why didn't he ride last night? . . . and now——"

"Then my lord will not see him?" Ismail wilfully misinterpreted.

"Bring him in."

And the sultan tapped a small gong with the mallet hanging on its pedestal. Four black mamelukes, fully armed, entered and took their posts at each side of the throne. Following them came Saoud the executioner with his great simitar.

"And to you, a thousand years. Haaaj Isfendiyar," returned the sultan to his friend's greeting. "They tell me," continued the prince, smiling, "that you inherited much of your property from an emir."

"Even so, my lord," replied Isfendiyar, wondering that at such an early hour there would be jests concerning inheritances.

"And among those articles was a poniard which you had inscribed with your name?"

"Even so."

"This, for example, which you dropped in the gardens last night, after failing to leave it between my ribs. . . . Seeking to inherit a throne this time, Haaaji?"

The sultan in his extended hand displayed the fragments of the weapon.

"My lord jests."

But Isfendiyar knew that doom lurked behind the fast-fading smile

and in the smoldering eyes of the sultan.

"Jest? I wish I did. Saoud! Isa! Ibrahim! Hussein! Said!"

The sultan struck his hands sharply together as he snapped out the names of his mamelukes.

The blacks advanced, seizing the astonished Isfendiyar.

"This is what remains of your poniard, which broke against my shirt of mail. You did not foresee that, did you, friend Isfendiyar?"

"Here in my belt is my poniard. Draw it and see," Isfendiyar commanded the mamelukes.

"Here is your poniard," countered the sultan, again displaying the pieces, "and it bears your inscription. This blade which you now offer me is blank. You have overstepped yourself once too often in your trick of inheriting things: and you armed yourself with the wrong blade. Isfendiyar, I admire the nerve which made you stay here to try again, instead of riding back into the desert. For who would have suspected? . . . But your judgment was faulty, and your head will pay."

"*Allah akbar!*" murmured Isfendiyar, seeing the hopeless odds, seeing that even his voluntary presence at court that morning had been construed against him, seeing that neither wit nor reason could extricate him from the trap. The evidence was damning; Ismail had won.

Saoud sought the sultan's eye. His fingers closed on the hilt of his blade.

"Isfendiyar, you were once my friend. Therefore shall I give you your choice of death in whatever form your fancy demands."

"Then let me die in single combat with Ismail, on horse or on foot, as he may elect."

"Crafty and plotting to the last! With your last move you would dispose of an enemy. But you know full well that you could not die in any combat with him. Therefore

choose . . . Isfendiyar, why did you make that mad attempt? Why seek me with a knife—me, your friend? Was it my fault that my fierce old father sent your father to his death? Why, I did not even know that Mamoun had a son. . . No, Isfendiyar, I shall spare your life; but I shall banish you, and give your house to be plundered."

And at the sultan's gesture of dismissal, the mamelukes escorted Isfendiyar to the eastern gate, stripped of his rank, once again a wanderer. His house was even then being pillaged by the rabble; and his horses were being led to the sultan's stables. Of all his fortune there remained but a purse of dinars, and that rare simitar which men called the Ladder to Heaven, on account of the transverse markings an ancient smith had forged into damascened steel.

"The Ladder to Heaven and a bit of gold. And I have had less even than that as a start," reflected Isfendiyar, thinking of a meeting with a Kurdish emir ten years ago.

WELL without the city walls, Isfendiyar sat down in the shade of a tree at the cross-roads, pondering on his next move. Into the hills to lead the revolt against the sultan? And why not? Why not lift the Ladder to Heaven against that prince who had exiled him on suspicion, that prince whose father had sent the father of Isfendiyar to his doom for the sake of a Kashmiri bayadere?

"But he spared my life, when he could have taken it . . . spared, in order to pillage, and send into exile a faithful friend and servant." And thus, each thought contradicting its predecessor, Isfendiyar sought to resolve the riddle of the situation.

Weary at last, and drowsy from the heat, Isfendiyar fell half asleep, and restlessly dreamed of seeking new fortunes, reprisal against the

tyrant who had had so little faith in him, and vengeance for the sake of Mamoun, his father whom the sultan's father had sent to his death.

Isfendiyar awoke with a start. It was late in the afternoon.

"Alms, in the name of Allah, alms!" whined a voice at his side.

"Beggars begging from a beggar!"

Isfendiyar tossed the ragged old mendicant a coin, recklessly flung him a dinar of gold.

"My lord is generous, and I am grateful. I will repair my lord's fortunes."

"And what do you know of my fortunes?"

"Who does not know what befell Haaj Isfendiyar? But I am old and wise, and you can profit by my wisdom."

"And regain my position by following the counsel of a beggar?"

"Beggar! Look!"

The old man dipped the alms of Isfendiyar into the dusty highway.

The whine had vanished from his voice; his keen, hard eyes regarded Haaj Isfendiyar intently, commandingly. Though ragged, disreputable, with grimy talons and matted beard, this old man who tossed a gold piece aside as so much dirt was surely no beggar.

"What then, old man?" queried Isfendiyar, amazed at such a reckless gesture. "And who are you to know so much about sultans and those who seek them with daggers? Perhaps you could even tell me who found my poniard and used it so clumsily. But who are you?"

"I am Ismeddin the darvish, whom Allah has favored with wisdom beyond that of other men; and I know strange devices wherewith to recoup one's fortune. And I know that your thoughts are of vengeance; that you regret you did not make the attempt whereof you are accused, knowing full well that you would not have bungled."

"Well then, Ismeddin, since gold does not interest you, I shall save it for one who will need it. But what do you want?" he continued, as he retrieved the coin and thrust it into his purse. "My influence at court? For men do not offer favors without seeking something in return."

"What have I to do with courts? Or with gold? I am a simple darvish who for the sake of doing a good deed would help you gain revenge and repair your fortunes."

"By finding the lost gardens of Irem, or going to El Moghreb to raise a force to reconquer Spain?" scoffed Isfendiyar, half out of patience, yet interested in the old man's fancies.

"No, Haaji. Follow me," commanded the darvish.

And Isfendiyar, once captain of a thousand horse, followed, and wondered that he did so. True, he had no place to go, no plans in mind save to go to El Moghreb, or perhaps to seek a friend in Azerbaijan; and one is never in a hurry about beginning such long trips. But to follow this ragged old man . . . unheard of! Yet he followed.

SOMEWHAT over an hour's walk brought them to the edge of a sparse jungle, lost in whose depths were the ruins of an ancient city. A most unsavory locality, one whereof strange tales had been told. Against men he could use the Ladder to Heaven; but against afreet and djinni . . . well, that was another matter entirely. And that old man's eyes glittered strangely. Isfendiyar halted.

"Haaji, do you know who I am?" questioned the darvish, likewise halting.

"Ismeddin the darvish, if you spoke the truth."

"Who is the Lord of the World?" queried the darvish quite irrelevantly.

W. T.—3

"There is no god but Allah, and Mahmet is his prophet," intoned Isfendiyar, as he placed his fingertips first on his temples, then on his lips, then, crossing his arms on his breast, made his salaam.

"Wrong, Haaji! Were that the truth, would you, an innocent man, be accused of attempting to assassinate your master, and be punished for the crime of another?"

"Iblis fly away with him!"

"A detail to be arranged in due course. But as I have said, you have been wronged, and you shall have ample recompense and great vengeance. This very evening you shall stand before the Lord of the World."

"The Lord of the World? If not Allah, then——" Isfendiyar shuddered, retreated a pace, and whispered, "Malik Ta'us?"

"No. Not the Lord Peacock, but rather him whose idle fancy created not only Allah, but all the gods before whom men have bowed. And you shall not leave me until you have heard me to a finish," commanded the darvish.

Isfendiyar approached a step, drawn by a compulsion that overcame his fear. Sweat glistened on his forehead. His fingers trembled as they curled around the hilt of the Ladder to Heaven.

"There is no god but——"

"Enough! And you need not finger your sword. I am your friend, the darvish Ismeddin; more your friend than you can possibly know. You will see strange things tonight, Haaji. And you shall have all the vengeance that you desire. If you are a man of courage, follow me."

The sun had set. Into the jungle the darvish led Haaji Isfendiyar, somewhat reassured, yet withal uneasy and consumed with apprehension. That glittering uncanny eye, that compelling voice, those sinister words. . . .

The jungle became denser; progress slower. Darkness, swift on the trail of sunset, fell and enveloped them. Ismeddin picked his way, following a path he must have known by instinct, so sure was his advance. Isfendiyar was guided but by the dirty white blotch of the old man's *djellab*. At last they halted at a breach in a wall that towered high above them.

"The ancient citadel of Atlânaat," announced the darvish with the lordly gesture of one who puts on exhibition some prized bit of personal property.

Isfendiyar trembled violently, despite his efforts to compose himself. That fiend-haunted ruin could bring him no good. He recollected tales of those who had sought the treasure said to be buried in its depths. Some few had returned; but those few had been stark mad and raving, and babbled of monstrous things they had heard and seen. And this old man spoke with such a proprietary air concerning the place!

The moon had risen, revealing a vast extent of shattered columns, broad avenues, and ruined buildings of colossal proportions. Grotesque figures leered at him from the strangely carved capitals of gigantic pillars; unhallowed sculptures writhed and twisted on the walls.

The darvish busied himself with gathering dead wood from just outside the walls, leaving Isfendiyar to make what he could out of the sinister surroundings. Then with a flint and steel he struck light, kindling a small fire at the entrance of the shrine before which they had halted.

"The hour is not at hand. Let us rest."

From his pouch he drew dates and cakes of millet which he offered Isfendiyar.

"Eat."

"I am not hungry," protested

Isfendiyar, recollecting the strange sayings of the darvish.

"Nonsense!" snorted the darvish. "You have not eaten since this morning. Eat, and fear nothing. I am your friend."

When Isfendiyar had disposed of the last of the food, the darvish drew from his voluminous pouch several dried plums, dark, shriveled, and scarcely larger than olives.

"These, Haaji, were plucked from a tree that grows on the slopes of Mount Kaf. Eat three of them, for they will give you the courage you will need to face that which is before you."

Isfendiyar eyed the plums, but made no move to accept.

"See, I myself will eat one, whichever one you leave."

But Isfendiyar did not note that the darvish palmed the remaining plum instead of eating it.

Strangely flavored were those small plums: bitter-sweet, and pungent, and aromatic of spices, a m \acute{e} l \acute{e} e of conflicting flavors curiously blended. Isfendiyar could not say just what they did resemble; certainly nothing the like of which he had ever before tasted. He nibbled a second plum. Why not? What if they were poison? What odds? The ten best years of his life had been swept away by the unjust suspicions of a capricious prince. And all the while the old man regarded him with that fixed, glittering eye.

"While we wait, Haaji, we shall have music."

So saying, the darvish drew from that same pouch a tiny *darabuk \acute{e}* , a small drum whose body of dark wood was laid off in seventeen oddly carved sectors. Its head was made of skin the like of which Isfendiyar had never seen.

"It is the tanned hide of an unjust prince," replied the old man to

Isfendiyar's question. "Flayed by his outraged subjects, ages ago. Abaddon has played on this drum in the depths of his black pit. And now listen to the tunes that I shall sound on it."

Squatting directly in front of Isfendiyar, the darvish began to play, tapping with his fingers on that tiny drum; with fingertips and knuckles and with the heel of his hand coaxing from it a reverberation of amazing volume. And as he played, in shifting, varying rhythms, he chanted in a language that Isfendiyar had not heard for ten years.

The old man paused in his playing for an instant and tossed into the embers of the fire a handful of powder which fumed heavily, so that through its mist Isfendiyar could see but the glittering, intent eye of the darvish. He ate the third plum, sucking from its seed the very last bit of spicy flavor. He nodded drowsily to the marching pulse of that tiny *darabukeh*, and to the strange words of the darvish, words that sang of vengeance, and flickering blades, and swiftly looping silken bowstrings, and of the Lord of the World who dreamed, and whose every dream was tangible fact. The dense, acrid, pungent-sweetness of the incense half strangled Isfendiyar; and the flavor of the last plum tingled on his tongue.

"The hour is almost at hand, Haaji," crooned the old man, "the hour of reprisal draws near . . . and you shall stand before the Lord of the World who dreams that which we see as things as they are . . . and he shall rebuild your fate as it should be . . . and you shall see those things whereof I have told you. Arise, Haaji, for the hour is here, and we have had enough music . . . and have but one more plum, Haaji. . ."

Isfendiyar arose as might some colossus arise from the dais of stone which it had occupied for a thousand

years. His pulse throbbed in cadence to the subtly shifting pulse of the *darabukeh*; and his mouth still tingled with the aromatic bitter-sweetness of those dried plums. He followed the darvish into the ruined shrine, and down a stairway into a subterranean vault where screened torches cast a flickering, indirect illumination upon its curved walls and cinnabar-sprinkled floor.

IN THE center of the vault was a dais whereon sat an old man, asleep, or in deep meditation. His head was bowed; his eyes were half closed; his white beard trailed to his waist; and between his hands he held a great globe of crystal in whose depths played and shifted the flickering torchlight.

"Haaj Isfendiyar," purred the darvish, "you are now before the Dreamer of Atlânaat, the Lord of the World, he who built this mighty citadel the day that he completed the creation of the world. He sleeps, and sleeping, dreams, and all things that seem to be are but fragments of his dream; and those things whereof he ceases to dream, at that instant cease to be."

And to all this Isfendiyar agreed; and of all things in the world this seemed the most logical, that the visions of that Dreamer should at the instant of dreaming become fact made absolute.

As he spoke, the darvish extended his arms and with passes of his long-nailed talons he stroked the forehead of Isfendiyar; then stepping to his left side, with his knuckles he rapped sharply here and there along his spine, and with rapid movements passed over his body, pausing to knead this muscle and that. And all the while he crooned in his purring monotone; and all the while Isfendiyar acquiesced to the strange things whereof the darvish sang, and with

each stroke and pass seemed to be drawn from his body, so that he could stand beside it and watch it, oven unto the stare of his own fixed eyes.

"All this is but a dream, and we are but one of the Dreamer's fancies. And were he but to awake, we and all things else would vanish and become as nothing, and less than nothing. So that he must not awake, ever . . . but I shall whisper in his ear that which I wish him to dream, that which when made manifest will give you ample vengeance and high fortune. . . Now gaze into that crystal into which he gazes, and think on your vengeance, and I shall play my drum, so that he will dream that which, as it is dreamed, becomes truth, and fact accomplished. . ."

The tiny *darabuteh*, spurred to life by the fluttering fingertips and thumping knuckles of the darvish, rolled, and purred, and reverberated in its maddening rhythm. The flavor of those dried plums still lingered in the mouth of Isfendiyar. His senses reeled, and swam, so that it seemed that he floated in a perfumed sea; erect, and on his feet, but floating, with waves of poison-sweetness warmly lapping his cheeks. The crystal became clouded, then opalescent, then clouded again. A murmuring filled his ears, the murmuring of many voices chanting from afar, and the thump-thump of drums that spoke of blood, and flickering blades, and the slowly flapping pinions of vultures.

The clouds parted; and there, before him, Isfendiyar saw the sultan walking in the gardens by moonlight, strolling as was his custom by fountains and among rose trees. And then from the shadows emerged a figure moving stealthily, and bearing a drawn poniard which shimmered icily. . .

Isfendiyar exulted at the vengeance to come; identified himself with the dark form of the avenger.

Surely it was himself that he saw, dagger in hand. And all that which the Dreamer dreamed was at that instant to be made truth, and a fact accomplished. The dark figure approached the sultan; the blade rose. . .

With a hoarse, strangled yell, Isfendiyar leaped forward, wrenching himself from his vision. The Ladder to Heaven flamed wide and swiftly. The head of the Dreamer rolled at his feet on the cinnamon-powdered floor.

Isfendiyar fled from that fiend-haunted vault, taking the steps four at a leap. Once above ground, he ran down the wide avenue, simitar still clutched in his hand, frenzy staring from his eyes.

The fragment of a shattered column interrupted his flight. He sprawled flat in the street, his blade ringing as it struck the paving.

"Why this haste, Isfendiyar?" queried a calm voice at his side. "Were the sights not to your taste?"

Staggering to his feet, Isfendiyar saw the sultan himself confronting him. He picked up the Ladder to Heaven, stared the prince full in the eye, then flung his simitar to the paving.

"Now mock me for saving you from the Dreamer and his dream!"

He reeled and would have fallen but for the sultan's supporting arm.

"I know well what you saw in the crystal, Haaji, for I heard the words of the old darvish who had drugged you with plums laden with *hasheesh*, and chanted your senses away with his mumming words and his thumping drum. Vengeance you sought; yet when you saw me about to be slain, you ended the Dreamer's dream."

Then, to the darvish, who had emerged from the vault, "Well, Ismeddin, are you through with your jugglery? Name your reward, for

you have served me well in vindicating my faithful Isfendiyar."

The darvish laughed.

"Well, and I have served myself also. And this I demand: that you restore Isfendiyar my grandson to favor."

"Your grandson?"

"Yes. For while as Ismeddin the darvish I have often come from the desert to advise and help you, I am also Ismeddin el Idrisi, and the father of that Mamoun whom your father sent to his death for the sake of a dancing girl. And now I return to the desert to meditate on the folly of serving princes. But I bear you no ill will for the sake of that fierce old man your father. If you need me again, seek me as before. A thousand years!"

And the old man vanished in the darkness of the ruins.

THE drugged, addled brain of Isfendiyar had cleared itself of the hypnotic thump of drums, the juggling words of the darvish, and the poison-sweetness of those strange plums.

"My lord, who was that Dreamer whose head I sheared off? Or was there really a Dreamer?"

"Oh, that was your friend Ismail. Circumstances were against you, damnably so; for even your presence at court was in keeping with your

shrewdness and audacity. But after having passed sentence, it occurred to me that the attempt on my life had been made for some purpose other than that of slaying me: for a true assassin would instinctively have kept his weapon, or even the remainder of it, in his grasp. Its being dropped was the first false note. And in the light of reflection, that warning note was the second error: I know you well enough to know that had you really designed my death, no one would have been able to warn me, for you always play a lone hand. Last of all, Ismail seemed too elated when he announced your presence this morning, and too disappointed when he heard the sentence. So I summoned Ismeddin, and later, invited Ismail to drink with me. Then, drugged, and adorned with a patriarchal beard, I sent him to this place to pose as Dreamer. Thus in the end he was killed by that very fidelity he had impeached."

"But suppose the strange tricks of Ismeddin had failed, and I had not struck?"

"I knew that when your grandfather proposed that test he was sure of himself and his strange powers. Well, and now to horse!" exclaimed the sultan as a groom approached.

And the wazir Isfendiyar rode back to Angor-lana at the right of his friend the sultan.
