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Cover Design	M. Brundage	
<i>Illustrating "As 'Twas Told to Me"</i>		
Israfe!		opposite this page
<i>Pictorial interpretation of Edgar Allan Poe's poem, "Israfe!," by Virgil Finlay</i>		
'As 'Twas Told to Me	Seabury Quinn	258
<i>A gripping weird tale of a beautiful witch in Puritan New England</i>		
The Magic Mirror	Algernon Blackwood	282
<i>A stranger from Tibet devises a fantastic and practical way to win at Monte Carlo</i>		
The Wreck	Alfred I. Tooke	288
<i>Verse</i>		
The White Rat	Earl Peirce, Jr., and Bruce Bryan	289
<i>An eery tale of a monstrosity created by a daring surgeon who sought to modify nature's laws</i>		
A Thunder of Trumpets	Robert E. Howard and Frank T. Torbett	303
<i>A strange tale of India—a story of marvelous occult power</i>		
The Mandarin's Canaries	Robert Bloch	316
<i>A grim and fascinating tale of a torture-mad Chinese ruler who fed strange food to his song-birds</i>		
The Wood	H. P. Lovecraft	324
<i>Verse</i>		
The Fire Princess (part 2)	Edmond Hamilton	325
<i>An intriguing story of tremendous doom threatening the world from central Asia</i>		
The Prophet Speaks	Clark Ashton Smith	348
<i>Verse</i>		
The Witch in the Fog	Alexander Faust	349
<i>A brief tale of thuggee—and a beautiful English girl</i>		
The Cavern	Manly Wade Wellman and Gertrude Gordon	354
<i>A short tale about a doomed man who seemed to bear a charmed life</i>		
The Eyes of Ustad Isa	Charles Henry Mackintosh	359
<i>An eery tale of the Taj Mahal</i>		
Weird Story Reprint:		
A Witch's Curse	Paul Ernst	363
<i>This story is reprinted by request from an early number of WEIRD TALES</i>		
The Jolly Hangman	Edgar Daniel Kramer	377
<i>Verse</i>		
The Eyrie		378
<i>A department in which our readers air their opinions</i>		

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Eyes of Ustad Isa

By CHARLES HENRY MACKINTOSH

An eery tale of the Taj Mahal

1

THINK deeply, now, and then name the most beautiful building in the world. The more you know about beauty in building, the more certain is it that your choice will fall upon that one to which I choose to give the title "Towers of Tyranny," rather than the *Taj Mahal!* Understand me clearly, though, I do not object to the name. After all, it *is* the tomb of Mumtaz Mahal, the chosen of the palace, and she was lovely and kind.

But it is not truly a monument to her. No, it is a monument to the tyrannous egotism, the savage cruelty, the base ingratitude of Shah Jehan, upon whose name I spit! For three hundred years, men have been saying: "*Shah Jehan built the Taj Mahal.*" Bah! Shah Jehan could not have built a tomb to hide the body of an accursed dog! He could but use his tyrannous authority to steal the work of a true builder, and sign it with his name!

But that has been the way of kings for

ever, and it is not that on which I base my deathless, bodiless hatred of Shah Jehan. It was not for that I drove him to the brink of insanity, drove him from his Peacock Throne, gave him, bound, brain and body, to the parricidal ingratitude that leapt from his own loins, and drove him down to death after eleven years of bitter imprisonment in his own palace-city, and drive him still, in the underworld, from horror to horror!

Nor shall my hatred be appeased until there be carved upon the cornerstone of the Taj Mahal: "*This blossom of white marble bloomed from the eyes of USTAD ISA, upon whom be Peace!*"

2

USTAD ISA, the Turk, was in Persia when, in 1027 of the Year of the Hegira, according to the calendar of the great Calif Omar, the emissaries of Shah Jehan sought him out and found him and said:

"Come. The Great Shah, the Shah of

Shahs, the Shah Jehan, has chosen you from among all the master builders of the age to create, at Agra, a building that shall be among buildings what Mumtaz Mahal was among women, and what Shah Jehan is among men. Come. Marble and all manner of precious stones, gold and silver, a lakh of lakhs of rupees, workmen outnumbering the armies of many monarchs, cunning and skilled craftsmen of every craft, chosen from the world's masters of crafts, all shall be beneath your hand and under your eye. You shall dream a dream of ivory towers of Paradise, and your dream shall be crystallized in white marble, to be the marvel of the world for ever and ever. Come."

And Ustad Isa came.

3

SHAH JEHAN received Ustad Isa in private audience and made much of him, saying:

"Oh, Shah of Builders, the Shah of Shahs delights to do you honor! Raise for me now a noble building, fit to enshrine the lost white loveliness of my beloved. Let it be beautiful and graceful even as she was beautiful and graceful. Build it so that the eyes of endless, unborn generations may gaze upon it, and see what the world has lost, in what the world has gained. Though the cost be one-half of my empire, count not the cost. You have my leave to begin."

And Ustad Isa said: "Harkening and obedience, oh Shah of Shahs. On my eyes be it!"

Yes, he used that common, curtly phrase, the poor, *blind* fool, for all that his eyes were then the deepest-seeing eyes in all the world! "*On my eyes be it!*" he said, and went out from the king's palace to begin upon his long, long task of loving artistry.

4

BEHOLD the building! One hundred and thirty feet square and seventy feet high, with a dome like a roc's egg of white marble, rising to a height of one hundred and twenty feet; with four tall, slender spires guarding the four corners, each spire one hundred and thirty-three feet in height. Flawless white marble, carved as though it were cloudy lacework. Gemmed mosaics, fit for the decoration of kings' diadems. Cunning metalwork of silver and of gold. Behold the setting for the building, the gardens of glorious color, the long mirror-pool wherein all that white loveliness repeats itself, until the mind of man swoons away from the unsupportable burden of so much beauty. Behold, indeed, the Shah of Shrines, from the brain of the Shah of Builders, to the memory of Mumtaz Mahal, to the glory and to the service of the Shah of Shahs, the Shah Jehan.

And the Shah Jehan looked upon the finished work, and his cold heart flamed again within him.

"It is good!" he said. "It is very good!"

And it was good.

5

AGAIN the Shah Jehan received Ustad Isa in private audience, to receive his reward.

"Is it indeed the crown of your work, oh Shah of Builders?" inquired the Great King.

"It is the crown of my lifework, oh Shah!" replied Ustad Isa.

"It is well. It is as it should be. It is as it *shall* be!" decreed the Shah.

He gestured, and from an archway behind the throne, two ebon slaves entered, one staggering beneath the weight of a

great brazier of rose-glowing charcoal, the other steadying a folk-like tool within the violet heart of the flame.

This Ustad Isa saw, yet knew not what he saw, nor that he saw for the last time.

The brawny slave who bore the brazier set it down before the throne, and seized the builder, twisting his arms behind his back and holding them there, crooking a huge black limb, like a banyan root, about his knees. The other slave drew the fork-like thing from the flame, its twin points bright as stars, and brought them before the builder's face.

Ustad Isa struggled, but he was as one of the bandar-log in the coils of the python. He cried out to the king: "Is *this* my reward for my service to the Shah of Shahs?"

The Shah shook his head. "You shall eat richly, you shall drink deep, you shall sleep softly all the days of your life, oh Shah of Builders, but you shall build no more. It is my will. I seal it—so!"

He gestured again, and the flaming points pierced the eyes of Ustad Isa, even as he cried out: "Not that! Rather slay me, oh Shah!"

The words ended in a wild shriek, while the foul smell of roasting flesh was wafted up to the nostrils of the Shah.

6

THE Shah's own physician tended the hurts of Ustad Isa, and after many days he was strong again. The Shah sent him a little black slave to be his eyes, and to lead him wherever he would go. Ustad Isa had the little slave lead him once again into the presence of the king.

"What more can we do for you, oh Shah of Builders?" inquired the ruler of the Mongol world, and Ustad Isa answered:

"I come to claim the reward for my service, oh king!"

"What reward do you crave?"

"Give me *death*, oh Great King! I cannot live without my work. I cannot work without my eyes. Give me death!"

The Shah shook his head, though Ustad Isa did not know that.

"The petition is denied," decreed the Shah. "We gave you our royal word that you shall eat richly, drink deeply, and sleep softly all the days of your life. It would have been easier to kill you, but you will learn to love life again. No, Shah of Builders, I give you *life*, not death."

And then Ustad Isa cursed the king, till the little slave fell on his face with fear, and the courtiers about the throne were shaken as by a wind in a forest of saplings.

The knuckles of the king's hands gleamed bone-white upon the arm-bosses of the throne. For many moments he did not trust himself to speak, and when he did, his voice rasped like a sharpening-stone upon a sword. "*Live, dog!*" he said.

But the dog preferred to die.

7

HOUR after hour, day after day, the Shah Jehan stretched length-long on the cold marble before the carved crypt of his lost queen, mumbling her name: "*Mumtaz Mahal! Mumtaz Mahal!*"

The Grand Vizier risked intrusion time and again, though each time he barely escaped with his life.

"Fool!" raved the Great King: "She is here and only here, I tell you! I see her, but I cannot touch her silken hair, her soft, warm flesh! I speak to her, but she does not answer me! Yet you dare to bid me rise and leave her and come away to the Council! I crave no other

voice than hers. Leave me, or——” he ended with a wild gesture.

And so, at length, the rebellious seed of his own loins shot up against him, and overshadowed the Peacock Throne. He who had been King of Kings was torn from the Tomb, and cast into another living tomb in the deep dungeons of his own palace. And there, too, that which he took to be the shade of Mumtaz Mahal visited him, and still with no loving words upon her lips. In cold and utter silence, her image hung in air above his eyes and looked down upon him without seeming even to see him.

He wailed: “When thou wast flesh of my flesh, did I not cherish thee? Did I not lift thee up to be the chosen of the palace? Did I not place the ransom of many rajahs upon thine arms and neck and about thine ankles? Did I not turn to thee often, and to thee alone? Wast thou not the heart of my heart, the soul of my soul, oh my beloved? And wherein, then, have I offended that thou withholdest from me the light of thine eyes, the solace of thy smile? And what must I do to win pardon?”

He forced himself to look straight into those well-loved eyes, now so impassive, so cold and dead. There was no spoken answer, but, for a moment, the fallen tyrant thought that the lovely eyes of Mumtaz Mahal became twin whirlpools of raging flame, and to his nostrils faintly came the foul smell of roasting flesh.

That vision, once seen, became recurrent. He could never look upon the face of his beloved but the whirlpool would at once begin to form and that ghastly stench to enter his nostrils.

The guard who brought him his coarse and scanty food, from the bounty of his son, the Shah of Shahs, found him one noon stiff upon the stone floor, his face frozen into such a mask of mingled hate and horror that never again could the man close his own eyes without a shudder.

The King of Kings, the tyrant, the robber of better men’s dreams, had gone to get the rest of his reward.

8

USTAD ISA met him just beyond the Doors of Death—Ustad Isa who had never left him alone for one moment, since he had dared to die despite the royal decree—Ustad Isa, who had formed his spirit-self into the living likeness of the king’s lost love, time and time and time again, until the kingly brain had become a nest of stinging scorpions—Ustad Isa, unto whom hatred had given the power to torture his torturer even after he had drawn him through the Doors of Death—Ustad Isa, who *still* plays the part of the king’s lost love, appearing, staring coldly with eyes that turn into whirlpools of flame, and vanishing in a foul stench of charring flesh, only to appear again—and again—and again—Ustad Isa, who shall continue to appear unto him of whom fifteen generations of fools have said: “*He built the Taj Mahal,*” until there be carved into the cornerstone thereof:

“This blossom of white marble bloomed from the eyes of USTAD ISA!”

You ask me who decrees that it shall be so? *I* decree it, I, *USTAD ISA!* On my eyes be it!

