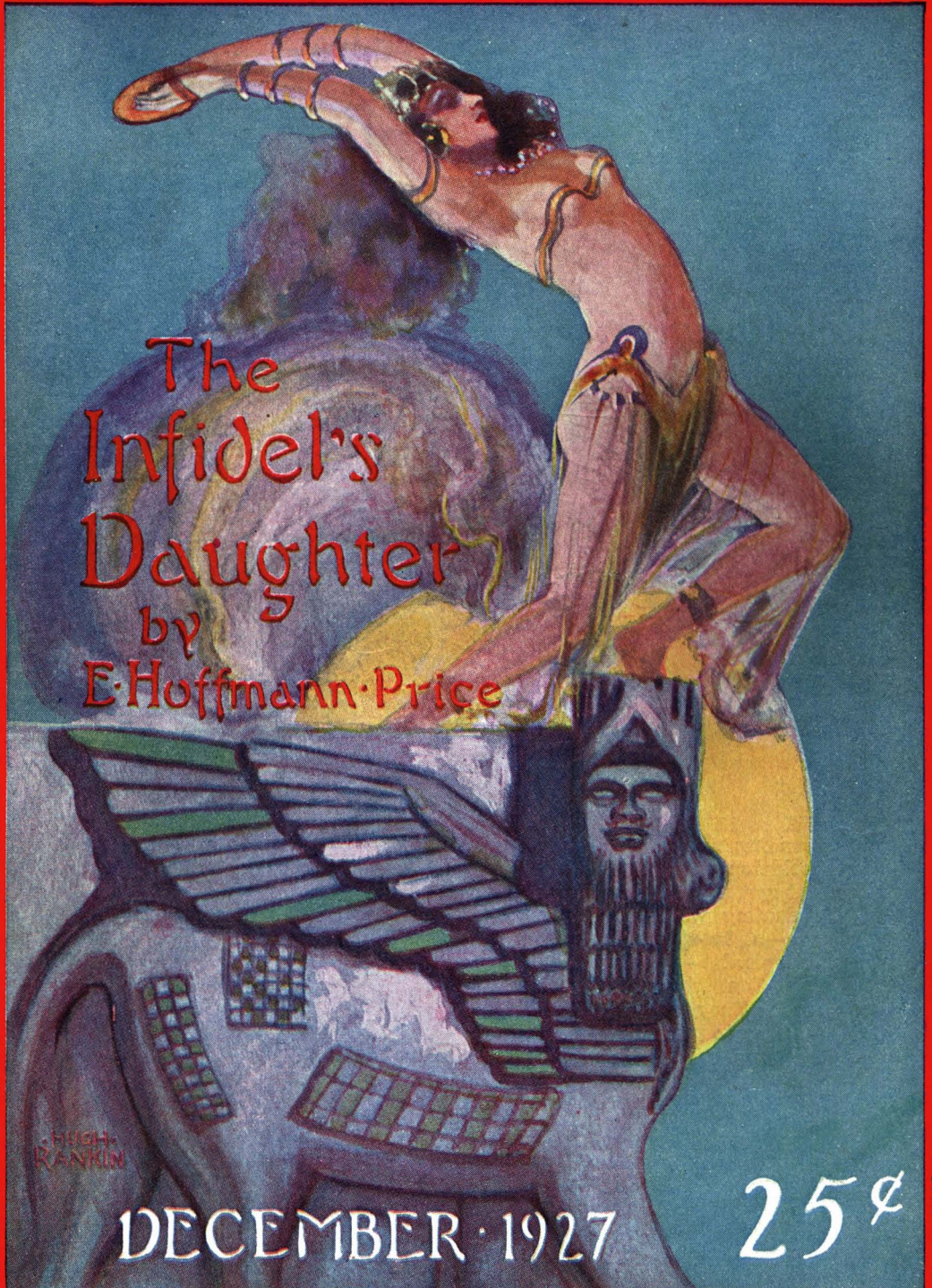


# Weird Tales

*The Unique Magazine*



The  
Infidel's  
Daughter  
by  
E. Hoffmann Price

DECEMBER 1927

25¢

30¢ IN CANADA

R. Anthony — Arthur J. Burks — Edmond Hamilton  
Bassett Morgan — Maurice Rothman — Everil Worrell

# Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE



A MAGAZINE of the

BIZARRE and UNUSUAL

VOLUME X

NUMBER 6

Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$2.50 a year in the United States; \$3.00 a year in Canada. English office: Charles Lavell, 13, Serjeant's Inn, Fleet Street, E. C. 4, London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

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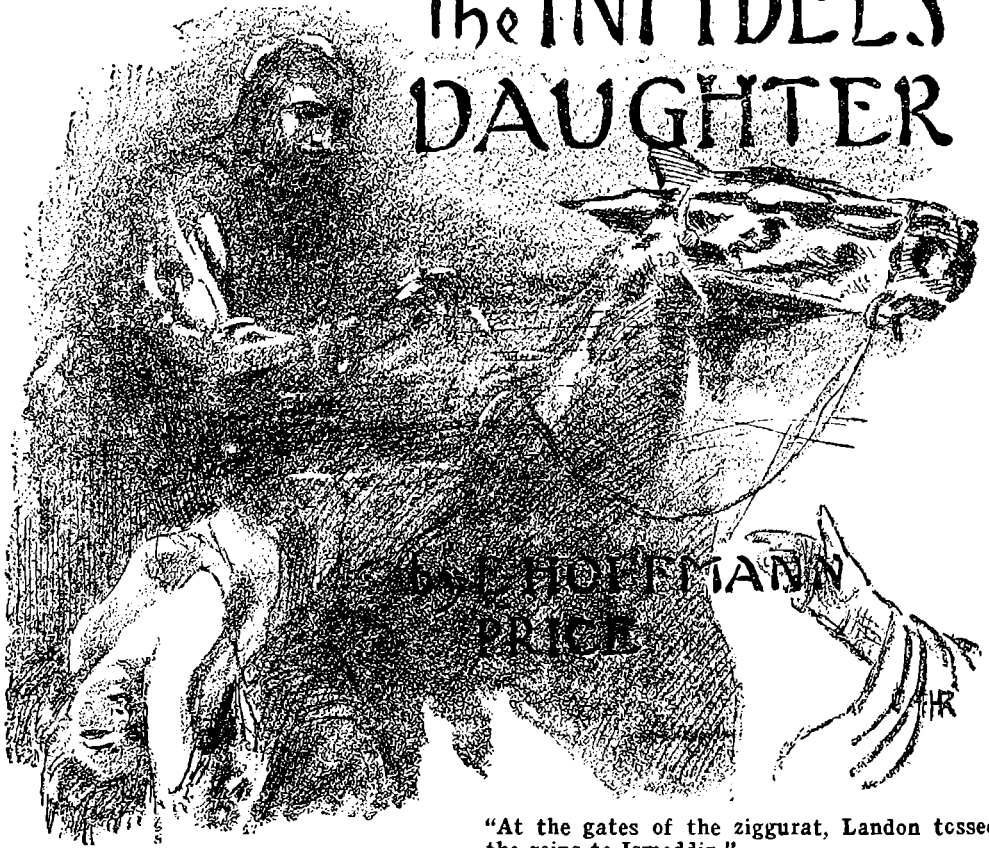
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## Contents for December, 1927

Cover Design .....	Hugh Rankin
<i>Illustrating a scene in "The Infidel's Daughter"</i>	
The Eyrie .....	724
<i>A chat with the readers</i>	
The Saturnienne .....	Clark Ashton Smith 728
<i>Versé</i>	
The Infidel's Daughter .....	E. Hoffmann Price 731
<i>Landon built a ziggurat in Feringhistan that he might aspire to the Hundred and One Strange Kisses of Sarpanit</i>	
The Sword of Jean Lafitte .....	W. K. Mashburn, Jr. 753
<i>The shade of the old pirate returns to wreak vengeance upon the last descendant of his enemy's family</i>	
The Swooping Wind .....	Wilford Allen 764
<i>A strange little tale about a scientist who was the sport and creature of the winds, and under their protection</i>	

(Continued on Next Page)

# The INFIDEL'S DAUGHTER



"At the gates of the ziggurat, Landon tossed the reins to Ismeddin."

**L**ANDON'S pavilion was pitched on a crest that rose high above the broad plain of Babil. About the foot of the mound his men were encamped: some quarreling, smoking, gambling, diverting themselves after the day's march; others walking their posts in the darkness beyond the guard-fires. Landon himself awaited the arrival of the chief of his caravan, Haaj Ismeddin, the ex-darvish.

"*Es salaam aleika, saidi,*" greeted the old man as he entered the pavilion.

"And with you, exceeding peace, Haaji," returned Landon. "Where are we tonight?" he questioned as the old man seated himself on the rug at the master's feet.

"We are on the plains of Babil," intoned the old man sonorously, beginning his recital which only in its details varied from that of the day before, and the many days previous to that one. "Just before us is Mosul, and far behind us is Balkh; to our right is the Tigris, and close at hand is the mound of Koyunjik, under which is buried a lost city of the infidels who once ruled this land."

"Where have we been, Haaji?"

"We have been in all the lands of the earth, *saidi,*" replied the pilgrim. "We have heard the tinkling *sitar* in Herat of the Hundred Gardens, and heard the splash of their fountains; we have seen the star of evening flame high above the un-

counted domes and pinnacles of prodigious Atlanâat; we have seen the incredible bulk of Angkor towering above the jungles of Siam; within the red walls of holy Marrakesh we have been the friends of princes, and in Khotan the khan esteems us."

"And what do we seek?"

"Who knows what we seek, *saidi*? In the tombs of the Kings of Pegu we found cool, unblinking sapphires, and great rubies that smoldered like the embers of a plundered city; and in far-off Java, in mysterious Borabador we found gold that ancient smiths had tormented into odd shapes for the pleasure of forgotten princes. Lost and obscure lands have disgorged treasures to us, who knew not what we sought, and cared not for what we found."

"And where are we going, Haaji?"

"Where the will of Allah leads us, in search of we know not what. And who am I to know more?" concluded the old man with finality, as one coming to the end of a lesson well recited.

"In search of I know not what, to be found I know not where," murmured Landon to himself.

"*Saidi*," began the pilgrim, "there is something which you seek. Can you not trust your servant? Have I not served you well?"

"Well and faithfully, Ismeddin," replied Landon. "What do I seek? What does anyone seek who wanders over the earth?"

"But you have nothing to seek, master. You are wealthy beyond reckoning; you have seen war and adventure; in Herat you have a palace and the daughter of an emir; and the princes of Asia are your friends, from holy Marrakesh to Turkestan. Tell me, *saidi*," persisted the old man.

"Very well then, Ismeddin! I am on the trail of a phantom. A vision, a legend, an apparition whose traces I have found everywhere, whose presence I have found nowhere. And

what I have in Herat of the Hundred Gardens is not enough for me. To say more would be madness. Now bring me my journal, Haaji, and then inspect the sentries. Remember, a hundred lashes for any who sleep on post tonight."

When Ismeddin left, Landon devoted himself to his journal, writing of Mosul, and the mound of Koyunjik, in whose base were the ruins of palaces, and the monstrous effigies of winged bulls whose human heads wore long curled beards, and were crowned with tall miters: solemn, awful images which archeologists had not been able to induce their laborers to disturb. And he regarded with curiosity the clay tablets he had found in the rubbish of the excavations that afternoon: tablets of sun-dried clay, inscribed with cuneiform characters and stamped with seals among whose devices he recognized the Tree of Life. But he could not name the king who knelt and worshiped a woman mounted on a lion.

Three clay tablets. All that remained of lofty walls and great palaces and high towers; three clay tablets, and the solemn winged bulls.

It was most unlikely that anyone could have passed the outposts and the encampment as well. And yet Landon sensed a presence. He glanced over his shoulder; moved away from the wall of the pavilion; resumed the writing of his journal; arose from his work, made a circuit of the pavilion, re-entered, and returned to his task.

The thump-thump of an *atabal* rolled up from the encampment; and then came a monotonous, guttural chant, and the beating of hands and the stamping of feet in unison. His men were diverting themselves with unsavory songs, to whose cadence one of their number burlesqued the steps of a Cairene dancing girl.

Presence, indeed! What if Ismeddin had seen the master glancing

over his shoulder and fidgeting in that fashion!

Landon felt his toes twitching nervously; found himself clenching and then relaxing his fists, and pausing to twist his mustache instead of writing his journal. It seemed that Ismeddin had been gone longer than usual. He wondered why his men never changed the tune of their chant at evening.

A faint breath of sweetness crept into the pavilion, scarcely perceptible at first, but gradually becoming more penetrating, mingling with the aroma of Landon's cigarette, so that he fancied it might be the source of that insinuating perfume. But it couldn't be! Those cigarettes had been made to his order, and ran true to form. And even one, had it been scented, would have betrayed its presence ere this. He ground the half-burned cigarette into the earth just beyond the fringe of the rug that covered the pavilion's floor, and fumbled for an unpolluted smoke. And then, with a start, he dropped his case.

A SLIM girl stood in the entrance, regarding him with long-lashed, smoldering eyes. Silver-white she gleamed through the smokelike wisps of gauze that clothed her shapely form. Yet before all this loveliness Landon shivered.

"I have sought you from afar, *saidi*," she purred softly, matching with her voice the sweetness that had heralded her arrival, "and finally I have found you. Here, of all places! Encamped on the ruins of that noteworthy house of mine which once stood on this very spot."

As she advanced to the center of the pavilion, she adjusted the extraordinary diadem that adorned the abysmal darkness of her hair. Landon marveled at the sinuous grace of her arms and slim fingers, and the undulating,

rippling glide of her walk. And he wondered that he had shuddered as he first met her veiled, Babylonian eyes.

She paused in her advance, halting at the center of the pavilion.

"Noteworthy house?" hazarded Landon, vacantly.

"Yes. It has been in ruins for some time. Oh, ever so long a time! You know, my friend, Naram-sin, built it for me. And when he died . . ."

Her voice trailed into nothingness; her words were completed in an arching of her pointed brows, and a fleeting gesture of her tiny hand, as though no words were needed where but one conclusion could be drawn.

Landon was still wondering how she had ever passed the sentries. For some reason it did not occur to him to wonder how long a time must elapse before one could pitch one's camp on the site of a once noteworthy house.

"Tell me, lady, and who are you to be seeking me?"

One thing at a time; never mind the discrepancy about Naram-sin, and the noteworthy house. And even one thing at a time is too much.

The girl laughed, and effortlessly seated herself, cross-legged, on the lustrous Bijar rug at Landon's feet.

"Those of Mosul who have seen me dancing here in the moonlight call me *Bint el Kafir*. Which in a way is right. Why not call me the Infidel's Daughter, when since the death of Naram-sin I have lived in a villa on the crest of Djeb el Kafir?"

Landon's brain was slowing up like run-down clockwork. He blinked, passed his hand over his eyes, stroked his beard. Questions were fighting for expression. Twice he half opened his mouth to speak, but said nothing. The girl disregarded his stupor, ignored his inertia, and patted her dusky coiffure.

"Yes," she repeated, "I am the Infidel's Daughter. And I have come

to tell you . . . but what have you been seeking all your life of wandering, *saidi?*''

And Landon, as in a dream, began the ritual he had so often heard old Ismeddin repeat, concluding with, "And I am going where the will of Allah leads me, in search of I know not what."

The girl smiled as at a pupil who has learned his lesson well.

"Say rather, *saidi*, if truth is any consideration, that you have heard of a shrine on the topmost crest of Djeb el Kafir, in which hangs a small drum, and at the base of whose altar are three clay tablets resembling those which you picked up today."

Landon momentarily recovered from the numbness that weighted his senses.

"Lady, you know too much of Djeb el Kafir. And you wear a diadem strangely like the one——"

"Why should I not know? I live there, and have, for a long time. But since *you* know so much, *saidi*, have you the heart to learn all? Come now, tell me the truth! Over all of Asia you have sought her who dances to the evening star on the crest of the Mount of the Infidel. But could you endure the Hundred and One Strange Kisses she bestows on those who summon her from across the border? Could you, *saidi?*''

Landon leaped to his feet, staring.

"Who are you?" he demanded, grasping the girl by the wrist. "And how do you know the thoughts I hardly admitted to myself?"

"My lord, I am more than Bint el Kafir. I am Sarpanit. And in Armenia they have another name for me. But you are bruising me. Be seated, *saidi*, and I will dance for you."

Whereat she drew from her curiously embroidered girdle a small vial whose stopper she removed. The heavy perfume that pervaded the pavilion increased to an overpower-

ing, deadly sweetness. With a drop from the vial she anointed her eyebrows; and with her fingertips she smeared a drop of that overwhelming fragrance on Landon's eyelids, and on his black beard. Then, pivoting about on the tips of her toes, she spilled the remainder of the essence in a circle about her, snapped her fingers thrice, and began a dance of statuesque, formal steps and poses.

"Now, if I only had music . . ."

From the encampment below there came, renewed, the chanting of Landon's men, and the pulsing of an *atabal*. But the rhythm was unlike any that Landon had ever heard his men play: a compelling, hypnotic cadence, a throbbing sorcery that rippled up and down his spine in waves of fire and frost, cutting into him like a sword-thrust.

The girl's tiny feet seemed to trace the figures of the Bijar rug on which they stepped; her body rippled and swayed; and her silver-white limbs seemed jointless and serpentine.

Landon noted that where she had spilled that unearthly perfume, there was now a circle of small, quivering, lapping flames; vibrant, incredible flames, bluer than the burning of sulfur.

She paused in her dance.

"There are three tablets which you will pry from the base of the altar, *saidi*. And from the corner of one a piece is broken, so that no man can read the inscription completely. But I will tell you the hidden name of the Infidel's Daughter, the one secret name of her many names, so that you can call her from across the Border."

With her lips to his ear, the girl whispered a word, and twice repeated it.

"Do not forget, *saidi*. . . . And this one kiss, this first, shall lead you to seek the hundred that follow."

Then, as she resumed her dance, the girl chanted a song of unearthly

desires and tormenting delights, of the Hundred and One Kisses with which Sarpanit had caressed Naramsin, who had been a king in Agade, and who had ruled in Babil. Landon nodded to the cadence of the muttering drums, dizzied by the flickering swiftness of her feet. . . .

A WISP of silk was vanishing through the door of the pavilion. A low laugh rippled in from the darkness. The sweetness was vanishing, and the blue flames had died. Landon started, rubbed his eyes, shivered. Then he drew his pistol and with its butt smote the small brazen gong at his side; paused, and struck a second and third time. Haaj Ismeddin appeared before its last vibration had ceased.

"What of the sentries, Haaji?" demanded Landon, ignoring the old man's salaam.

"On their posts, *saidi*. And awake," he added; unnecessarily, surely, for it was too early for sentries to sleep on post.

Together they inspected the sentries, much to the old man's amazement. And more to his amazement, Landon took an electric torch and closely scrutinized the earth that marked the patrolled boundaries of the encampment. Then, returning to his pavilion, he repeated that same close examination of the surrounding earth.

Ismeddin held his peace, and refrained from inquiring what the master had lost. One can never tell just what may be lost by one who wanders too long in the desert and among ruins; so that it is not wise to ask questions. Yet it seemed that the master was looking for footprints which he could not find.

"The earth is very firm here, and a light tread might fail to leave an imprint," he commented as he finally entered the pavilion.

"Even so, *saidi*."

"And a stealthy, agile person might indeed have passed vigilant sentries."

"Even so, *saidi*," agreed Ismeddin.

Landon smoked in silence until his cigarette seared his fingertips.

"Where are we going, Haaji?" he snapped.

The old man stared, perplexed; for that question was out of order. The ritual had already been complied with. But habit asserted itself:

"Where the will of Allah leads us, in search of we know not what——"

"Ah, but now we do know, Haaji," interrupted Landon. "Listen: tomorrow we start northward, into the uttermost limits of Kurdistan, and then still farther north to Djeb el Kafir, on whose crest there is a curious shrine——"

"No, master, there we will not go," contradicted Ismeddin.

"What?"

"I have spoken. We will not go."

"Why not?" questioned Landon, amazed at the old man's contradiction.

"It is a place of evil, *saidi*, where the Infidel's Daughter dances to the evening star."

"What do you know of the Infidel's Daughter?"

"Too much. Too much entirely. So that I do not care to learn more. And we will not go."

"Haaji!" snapped Landon.

The old man glanced up and met the relentless, adamant fire of Landon's unwavering stare; quivered under that pulsating, merciless will conveyed by the master's predatory eyes; shivered . . . shrank . . . yielded.

"We will go, Haaji," came the slow, deliberate voice of the master.

"Even so, *saidi*," conceded the old man, admitting defeat.

"Yes. I will go, and you with me; for there will be words which I can

not speak, and scripts which I can not read, and calculations which I can not make; and in all this you shall serve me. That is all, Haaji."

Ismeddin bowed himself from the master's presence. Once without the pavilion and beyond the view of its interior, he halted, lifted his eyes, searching for some constellation, until his gaze rested on a scintillant, evilly flaming, ruddy star that dominated the southeastern quarter of the heavens.

"Playmate and brother of the Infidel's Daughter, may Allah drown your fires in nethermost hell! And you, Infidel's Daughter, by what right do you walk the earth again? Who called you from Aralû?"

Then, head bowed, Ismeddin sought his quarters, where he finally cursed and muttered himself into a troubled sleep.

**I**N THE morning the caravan began its march to the north of Kurdistan, bound for the Yuruk Mountains, and beyond, into that wild land of uncertainty that lies south of Trebizond, where strange gods make their homes; where Anaitis is worshiped with curious rites, and where Malik Taûs spreads his painted fan; where Djeb el Kafir towers loftily to an evil eminence, crowned by the seldom-sought shrine of the Infidel's Daughter.

*Bint el Kafir* they called her in the south, on the plain of Babil, a flickering apparition that beguiled wanderers, and dabbling necromancers who sought to reach across the Border; seduced them from their senses, and led them to their doom with her song of the Hundred and One Strange Kisses, and of the indescribable pleasures and joyous torments she once lavished on Naram-sin of Agade. And thinking on all this, Landon's men no longer sang to the beating of *atabals* when they made camp of an evening;

desertion thinned the ranks of the caravan to a handful, so that there remained but the faithful few, headed by Landon and the somber-eyed Haaj Ismeddin, to push on through the passes of the Yuruk Mountains, bribed by the master's gold, and beaten by his fierce, exultant eye.

Finally, one evening after the tents had been pitched, Ismeddin entered the master's pavilion and announced, "We are at the foot of Djeb el Kafir. Just before us, and high above, is the shrine of the Infidel's Daughter. Behind us is the source of the Tigris; and close at hand is . . . our doom, *saidi*. Turn back!"

Landon in his exultation dispensed with the remainder of the recital; for now that he knew what he sought, the overpowering madness of his knowledge veiled the memory of his years of wandering, so that the uncounted domes of prodigious Atlanâat, the incredible bulk of Angkor, and red walls of holy Marrakesh were as nothing, and less than nothing.

"Turn back, *saidi*!"

"No, Ismeddin," replied Landon, gently, as one who reproves an erring child. "Have we two ever before turned back? And the doom will be mine, will it not?"

The next morning Landon, on foot and attended only by Ismeddin, began the ascent of the final peak of Djeb el Kafir. All day long they fought their way up the pathless, perilous sides of the mountain, until at last, shortly before sunset, they attained their goal, and halted before a great, conical mass of black rock that rose out of the thin earth of the crest of Djeb el Kafir. In color and texture and luster it was different from the stones in the vicinity: a black outlaw among the gray natives.

"The shrine, *saidi*. The house of *Bint el Kafir*. Ages ago it fell from



heaven, white, lustrous, dazzling; but the memory of her untold iniquities blackens it."

"A meteorite," thought Landon, recognizing the texture and dark color.

As they approached, they noted the sculptures in low relief; smooth, polished by the winds of ages, almost obliterated. At the sight of them Ismeddin stroked his beard and muttered; and Landon wondered if after all that conical rock might not be the topmost pinnacle of the palace of Iblis, reaching up and passing the surface of the earth.

Then, rounding the circumference of the rock, they saw that the sheltered sides were more finely and clearly sculptured. The figures over the low arched entrance were minutely detailed; and the panels at either side were as delicately carved as a cleanly struck medal. A woman of incredible beauty was mounted on a lion, and received the adoration of bearded, kneeling kings. And then there were panels not as easily or explicitly described; tormented and curiously interlaced figures depicting things which, even if allegorical, were grotesque and outlandish beyond all imagining.

"Let us return, *saidi*," urged the old man. "It is not good to look upon such things." And Ismeddin indicated the unholy sculptures that flanked the doorway of that black, conical shrine that pointed upward like a pudgy, misshapen index finger.

But instead of replying, Landon drew from his belt a flashlight and entered the low archway, shaking off the restraining hand of Ismeddin. The old darvish, foot on the threshold, about to enter, shrank back. Loyalty to the master had its limits.

As Ismeddin paced to and fro at the entrance, he noted the indirect glow of the master's flashlight; heard the tinkle of tiny bells, and the snap-

ping of exceedingly dry wood; heard Landon's footsteps as he prowled about in that awful shrine; became aware of an overpowering, deathly sweetness, as of all the sandalwood of the Indies and all the roses of Naishapur blended into one compelling fragrance. The old man shuddered and wondered what *djinn* or *afreet* would materialize and drive them both stark mad.

"Christ above! Skin and bones!" came the wide-spaced accents of Landon from within. And an instant later he stumbled out of the shrine, bearing in his hand three clay tablets. In the other he grasped a small kettle-drum, and a glittering object of silver filigree and saw-piercing: a curiously wrought diadem.

Ismeddin saw that the master's dark bronze had paled to a sickly yellow; that his hands trembled, and that his lips twitched; not with terror, but rather unbelief, awe, incredulity beyond expression.

"Skin and bones, Ismeddin," he repeated, speaking to himself rather than to his companion. "A king lying on a lofty dais. And on his forehead was the print of rouged lips. On his face the look of him who had lived in an instant all the wonders and bliss ever known in the whole mad lifetime of those who eat hasheesh. . . ."

Ismeddin followed the master's footsteps down the pathless slope.

"He seemed asleep . . . I shook him by the shoulder . . . my hand met not the substantial form of a man, but a hollow shell, skin and bones . . . as the shell of an insect, dried in the sun. . . ."

"You saw that, master?"

"Even so, Haaji. And she herself was there, but I could not see her."

Darkness had fallen. Ismeddin and the master made camp.

"*Saidi*, do you know what you saw?"

"I do, and yet, I do not, quite."

"You saw one who sought the Hundred and First Kiss. And found it." Then, noting the plunder: "What have you there?"

"Three clay tablets, which you must teach me to read; a drum with a head of serpent's hide, which I must learn to play; and this diadem, the like of which I have seen only once before."

"And where did you see it before?"

"In my tent on the mound near Koyunjik. Where she danced before me."

"Ah!" The old man understood. "Saidi, break the tablets into small pieces; toss the drum into this fire; and drop the diadem into a deep well."

"No, Haaji. And to see that *you* do not do that, sleep, while I stand watch tonight."

AT NOON the next day Landon and Ismeddin rejoined the train at the encampment at the foot of Djebel el Kafir; and then, on the following morning, they started on the return trip to the south, toward the source of the Tigris, and thence eastward, with Syria as their ultimate destination. And in Damascus the caravan disbanded, leaving Landon and Ismeddin in that ancient city to recuperate from the long march.

"Since you insist, I will read the wedge-shaped characters on those accursed tablets," Ismeddin finally agreed. "It is the old, forgotten language of the hills, older than that spoken by the infidels who once ruled on the plains of Babil; a different language, but written in the same letters. Naram-sin of Agade learned it. And summoned her from across the Border. You saw what was left of him. You will surely follow. Forget it."

"No, Ismeddin. All these years of adventure have brought me every-

thing but content. So let me track this madness to its finish. I will call her from across the Border. Spell me the first line!"

"Saidi," began the old man, many days later, when the tablets had finally been transcribed, "many years have passed since these words were written. In the days of Naram-sin, the proper place from which to call her was near Mosul. And to this day there are legends of the great tower, that ziggurat which he built for her."

"But where shall I build?"

"I can not say, yet. But on a different site. It depends on the positions of the planets, and on celestial configurations. Offhand, I can not say where."

"But what difference, Ismeddin?"

"It is so written. Not only must you pronounce the proper words, and have built the ziggurat, correct in location as well as structure, but also have gone through rites of purification, ending by passing through *bit nûri*, the bath of fire. And even then she will cross the Border only under certain conditions which you will learn from these tablets," explained the old man. "And whether the experiment can ever succeed is not assured." Ismeddin indicated the broken corner of one of the tablets. "Some of the text is missing. Her hidden and secret name is lacking. Without it——"

"But I know that name!" exulted Landon. "So describe me the ziggurat. We will outbuild Naram-sin."

"But how do you know that lost name?"

"I know what I know. That, of all things, I do know."

"What is it, *saidi*?"

"You are my teacher, not I, yours. That word was lost so that none could call her before me. It was revealed to me."

"Where? In the shrine?"

"Who can say?" evaded Landon. "So get to work on your calculations."

And Landon left the darvish to mutter and fret over the tablets, to compute and predict planetary aspects.

DAY after day Ismeddin labored with his calculations, growing more and more somber, sullen, and morose; ever seeking to dissuade Landon from his madness. And then, finally, he brightened, apparently resigning himself to the fatal folly of his master.

"It is solved, *saidi*," announced Ismeddin one day. "But it remains to be seen whether you can call her. Time has passed, and the signs of heaven have shifted, so that instead of on the plains of Babil, you must build the ziggurat in *Feringhistan*."

"That's a bit indefinite," protested Landon. "*Feringhistan* covers a lot of ground. Really now, Ismeddin—"

"Patience, *saidi*, patience! I have calculated the exact site of the ziggurat." Whereupon the old man turned to a mercator's projection of the world and laid off the latitude and longitude of the calculated point, marking its position with a pin. "There you are, my lord. Now pronounce me the outlandish name of that barbarous corner of *Feringhistan*."

"I suppose I ought to bust your jaw after the *Feringhi* fashion, and then make you spend the rest of the day singing *Columbia the Gem of the Ocean*." Then, laughing at Ismeddin's perplexity, Landon continued, "You've picked the United States of America, and that particular state where I spent my younger days . . . until I left for my health. . . ."

"Ah! Then perhaps your health would not permit your returning? Anyway, even your great wealth would not be enough to build a zig-

gurât in that mad land where workmen are paid such prodigious sums for their labor."

"It's been a good many years now, and I'll chance my health. As to expenses, we have the money to back us. Neither objection holds; and the next boat will take us to my native land——"

"Native, *saidi*, but as foreign to you as to me. Go back to Herat, to your own great house where the daughter of Abdulrahman el Durani awaits you. Forget this luminous peril, this alluring apparition. You hasten to meet your doom."

"All of which I know and accept; so that I shall seek Sarpanit, the Infidel's Daughter, and find her, and whatever doom she may bring. Tomorrow we leave for Beirut, and then on the first boat we shall sail for America. And this is the law, Ismeddin; so forget your objections, and serve me as faithfully in *Feringhistan* as you have in the lands of Islam."

## 2

THE scaffolding and debris incident to construction had finally been cleared away; the workmen had departed; and now, from the crest of a distant knoll, Landon contemplated the colossal bulk of the tower that rose loftily above the rolling plain. Its first stage of black masonry just topped the tallest trees of the surrounding grove; its successive stages, of diverse colors, ascended in terraces and culminated in a seventh and topmost stage of gleaming white, which from its great height commanded the plain and near-by town: a lordly, monumental work, modeled after, but surpassing, that tower which long ago had been reared from the plain of Babil to pierce the skies and provide man with a stairway to the abode of the gods.

"I wonder, Ismeddin, if this Naram-sin built her such a house as this ziggurât?"

"No, master, not like this. And when time comes to an end, and the last man seeks a place to pitch his tent, he must look elsewhere; for no camp will ever be made on the site of *this* ziggurât. Neither the hand of man nor the fires of heaven can ever shake it. Under the lintel——"

"Let *that* be on my head also, even as the unutterable madness of this quest, against which you counseled me in vain. It was so prescribed; and I could but follow the text. And besides, is it not an honor to be im-mured beneath the lintel of a house built for Sarpanit?"

Landon vaulted to the back of his Barbary stallion; but before starting down the slope, paused to contemplate his work. The sun had dipped below the horizon, so that all was obscure on the plain below, save the loftily towering silver-white masonry of the topmost stage.

"Naram-sin built her no such house. And she came across the Border and danced before him on the moonlit terraces of his ziggurât."

"And the incandescent madness of the Hundred and First Kiss left him seared and lifeless," warned Ismeddin, as he reined up beside the master. "Abandon it now, *saidi*, while you still can."

"No. Neither hell's fire nor the black hands of Iblis can turn me aside. Nothing can stop me."

"You forget, master," suggested Ismeddin, as their horses picked their way down the slope, "that one thing can stop you."

"Yes?"

"Even so. Some girl of the village. Just one slip, and the Infidel's Daughter will not cross the Border, for she is inhumanly jealous."

"The village!"

Landon snorted his contempt.

"You are more of a jester than a

darvish, Ismeddin. I left my house in Herat, and the daughter of an emir to follow this madness into *Ferimghistan*, to this very spot where you say the avatar shall materialize."

But under his badinage, Landon was troubled at the thought of that which he was attempting, even as a madman in his lucid moments is perturbed by the memory of his obsession.

"No, Haaji, in the entire world there is no woman who can equal her who appeared in my pavilion on the plain of Babil. Her eyes were a smoldering darkness, and her voice a purring, rippling sweetness. And even yet her perfume lingers in the rug on which she danced."

And then, as he leaned forward in the saddle, the Barbary stallion stretched out in a smooth, extended gallop. At the gate of the ziggurât, Landon reined his horse back on his haunches, and dismounting, tossed the reins to Ismeddin.

An hour later, on emerging from the third stage of the ziggurât, Landon spoke of going to the village to call for mail.

"Which horse will you ride, *saidi*?"

"Neither. I'll walk."

And Ismeddin, who knew that a horse is at times too much company, held his peace. As Landon, on foot, left the ziggurât, the old man opened the outer gate slightly, seated himself cross-legged in the shadow of one of the monstrous winged bulls whose mitered heads upheld the ceiling, and, like the darvish he had once been, entered the silence.

At the post-office Landon found a letter awaiting him. Its seals seemed intact. At the sight of them he frowned, recognizing their device; tore the unopened letter in half, then, pausing, pieced it together and read the fine Persian script of the message from Herat. Once on the street, he

wandered aimlessly. Passers-by avoided him, giving him the paving, shrinking from contact with that lean man and avoiding the mordant glance of those somber eyes.

They called him back to Herat; yet in his native land he was a foreigner, stared at from a distance, a distance which was scrupulously kept.

Landon wandered aimlessly, and wondered, nor heeded the lady of the evening who trailed him and with professional allurements sought to inveigle him. Sought to ensnare him, until, under the glow of a street lamp, she recognized her prospective prey, and recoiled before the somber, fierce eye that for an age-long instant impaled her.

And then he stalked into the smoky air of Tiptoe Inn, seating himself at a table apart from the others, but next to a booth, occupied, as he judged from the murmur of conversation.

*Shirazi wine . . . the reek of raw corn whisky from the hills . . . sandalwood and patchouli . . . the stench of cigarettes tossed aside to smolder to extinction . . . the plucked strings of a sitar . . . the blatant screech and moan of saxophones . . . the tinkling, mistily spraying fountains of Herat . . . the raucous, rasping voice of a cabaret singer. . . .*

And the Infidel's Daughter, Sarpant, the Bright and Shining One, was to cross the Border and appear in this strange land. . . .

From the adjoining booth came the purring voice of a woman who spoke with the blurred, indefinable accent of one who speaks many tongues; louder than before, but still softly, suavely, though with the sting and crackle of the lash in each finely enunciated word.

"It is true," she declared, "that all men are jackasses. But to think that I'm listening to the King of Men. No," she resumed, interrupting her

companion's protest, "I don't want you nor your damned car, nor your apartment. And that is that!"

"So you've become pious all of a sudden? Perhaps you've forgotten——"

A splash, and a crash of glass.

"You hell-cat. I'll——"

"Go to it. Here's luck!"

Landon glanced up in time to see the high-spirited lady leaving the booth. Trim ankles, and dainty feet; jade ear-pendants, and rebellious, blue-black curls, and a fine, proudly carried head; and though her form was concealed by her cape, Landon knew that only a shapely, well-proportioned woman could achieve that effortless, undulant walk.

"Don't know who she is, but she sounds like a woman after my own heart," reflected Landon. Then he noted that while a few smiled approval as the victrix left the field of battle, there were other groups who scowled and muttered to each other.

That bit of distraction had cracked Landon's introspective gloom, so that on his way back to the ziggurat he had no thought of the letter from Herat, nor of the lurid star which each night progressed farther into the configuration described in the cuneiform tablets. Strange, how in the face of a curious and uncertain doom one can pause to laugh.

As Landon entered the steel-barred gate, Ismeddin emerged from his post in the shadow of the winged bull.

"Master, there was a visitor this evening."

"Indeed?"

"Yes. Look!"

And Ismeddin thrust before Landon's eyes a mask of vermilion-colored silk. "The open gate tempted him. And I . . . but I am an old man, and I was unarmed," apologized Ismeddin, "so he lost nothing but his mask."

"Very good, Haaji. You're in *Feringhistan*, where they discountenance private graveyards. If this fellow had been found with a bit of cutlery between his ribs, or a cord about his throat, we might conceivably have some explaining to do. And remember, we're outnumbered, and we're foreigners."

"But in Angor-lana, one evening——"

"I know, Ismeddin. But this is my native land." And Landon smiled sourly.

ONE night, a week later, Landon thrust aside the three clay tablets which he had been studying, pronouncing after Ismeddin the age-old tongue whose secret they had wrested from the wedge-shaped characters. Landon's wrists and fingers were numb from playing the snakeskin-headed drum, and his brain reeled from the insinuant sorcery of the rhythm he had coaxed therefrom.

"I'll ride tonight, Ismeddin. Suleiman needs exercise. And I need a rest."

A few minutes later the old man led the pawing, belligerent stallion from the stable. Landon mounted and gave the fierce beast his head, letting him pick his course across the moonlit plain. Mile after mile he sped, until finally, lacking the urge of the spur, the stallion slowed down to a walk. Landon, relaxed in the saddle, dozed, and dreamed of Herat, and of the mound at Koyunjik; and mixed into his wandering thoughts, ever recurring in one guise and another, was a girl with trim ankles and jade ear-pendants.

A lurid star flamed over her head . . . and as she set on her blue-black hair a curiously wrought diadem, the piquant irregularity of her features became softened, transfigured into an astonishing loveliness. . . .

The stallion came to an abrupt halt,

waking Landon with a jerk. The smell of smoke and smoldering wood and the odor of tar fanned his nostrils. And then he saw why Suleiman had recoiled, snorted, and tossed his head; athwart the path, almost beneath the horse's hoofs, was a woman, sprawled in a heap, unconscious.

"Steady, lad!" And then, dismounting, he saw that the girl was clad only in a slip of filmy silk, torn, soiled, and clinging in shreds to her lacerated back and sides. Her wrists were pinioned together with a piece of clothes-line. She was still breathing, and stirred faintly at his touch.

"Well, we can't leave her here . . . I'll be damned!"

Landon recognized the girl of Tip-toe Inn, the insouciant one who had a few nights ago so boldly declared herself. As he cut the lashings from her wrists, she opened her eyes, murmured confusedly, shrank from his touch.

"Don't worry, sister. Let's go!" And so saying, he picked up the half-conscious girl, mounted Suleiman, and turned back toward the ziggurat, leaning forward in the saddle, urging the Barbary stallion to a longer stride.

At the gate of the ziggurat, Landon tossed the reins to Ismeddin, who took charge of the foaming Suleiman. In due course, if he so pleased, the Master would say more of the bruised, disheveled burden he had carried into the hall of winged bulls, and up the staircase flanked with parading archers. Nevertheless, the darvish wondered, and as he groomed Suleiman, he smiled, the first time in many weeks; smiled, and hoped that the woman was young and lovely.

"*Bismillahi rrahmani rrahheem!*" he ejaculated, as he put the finishing touches to Suleiman's silky coat, and

polished his dusty hoofs. "Praise be to God, lord of the worlds! Finding her by chance, and riding back as though the black hands of Abaddon reached out after him. . . . *Saidi*, may this indeed be the daughter of some infidel!"

The old man chuckled at his own play on words, and stroked his white beard.

"Please don't stand on formality," replied the girl, as Landon, half an hour later, knocked at the door of the apartment wherein he had left his guest. "Come right in."

"Well, I didn't want to take you at a disadvantage. How do you feel now?"

"More like myself, thanks to a bit of first aid."

"I fancy we've met before," resumed Landon. "At a distance, that is. In the Tiptoe Inn, a few nights

ago. You were laying down the law to some friend, and ended by——"

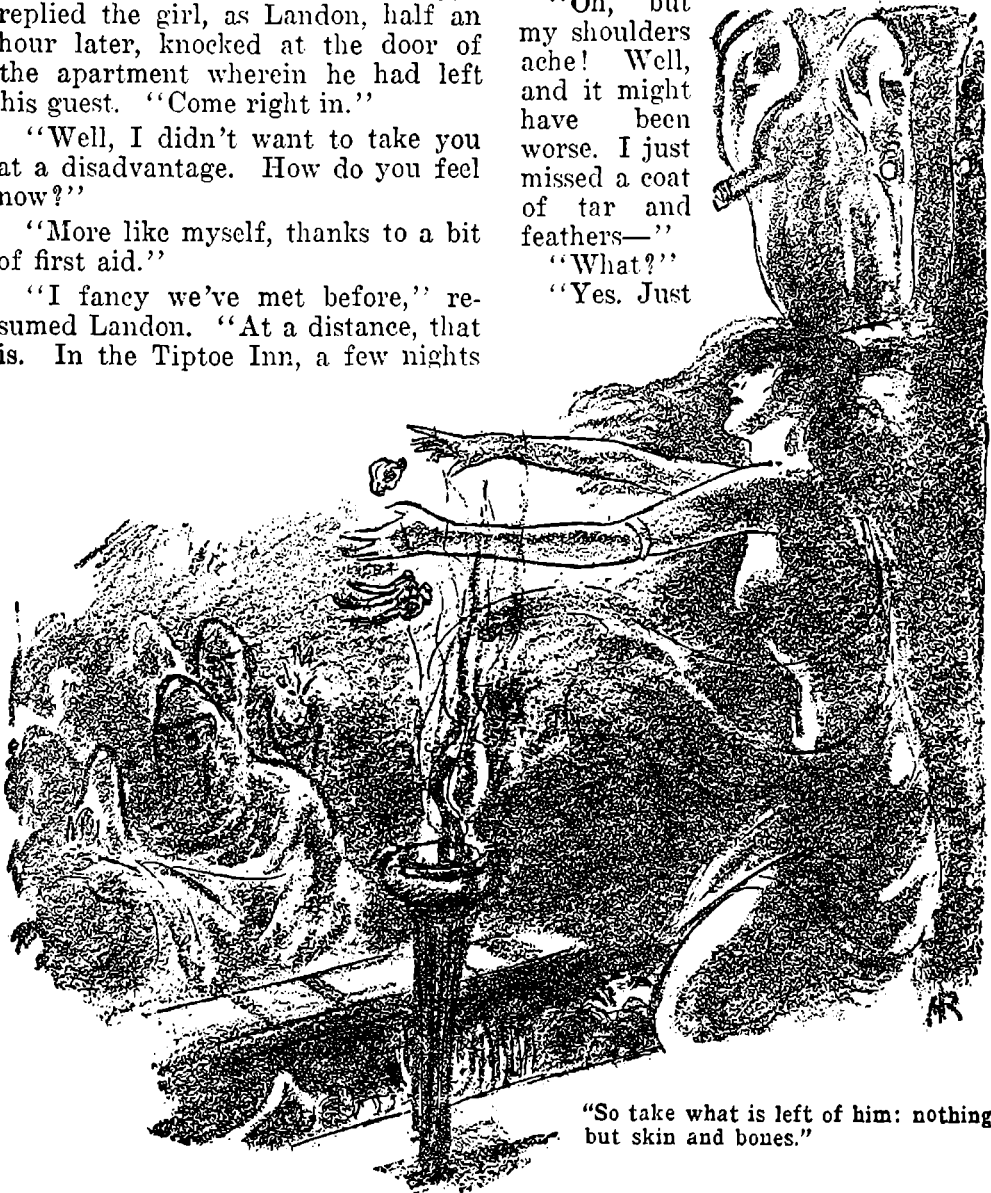
"Christening him with a ginger ale highball." The girl laughed softly, then continued, "And here you see the result."

She shivered, and drew more closely about herself the brocaded robe in which Landon had wrapped her before leaving her to doctor her bruises and lacerations.

"Oh, but my shoulders ache! Well, and it might have been worse. I just missed a coat of tar and feathers——"

"What?"

"Yes. Just



"So take what is left of him: nothing but skin and bones."

that. But one of the Knights had a kind-hearted streak, so they merely beat me with rawhide whips until I passed out. I don't know how long I was lying there when you found me."

"Must have been an hour or so. Come to think of it, I did smell tar along with the fire, a couple of yards to the side of the path. But what are these Knights, anyway?" demanded Landon, who had never, even in barbarous Angor-lana, seen a slave so mercilessly flogged.

"Surely you've heard of the Knights of the Saffron Mask!"

"No. Tell me."

"You'll hear of them soon enough, if they learn I'm here. They're a secret order—but how in the world have you missed hearing of them? And where am I?" she questioned, glancing about her, and indicating the sculptured and tapestried walls.

"All in due course. Please continue about these Knights," suggested Landon.

"They're self-appointed guardians of public safety and morals, and particularly of Christianity in general. Jews, Catholics, and atheists are their particular aversion, as well as anyone who is inclined to be unconventional. And whoever offends them is introduced to tar, feathers, and the lash. Witness myself. Once in a while they make effective use of rope, and a tall tree."

"Conducting a *jihad* under cover, so to speak?"

"Exactly. Holy war describes the doings of these bigots."

Landon wondered that the girl had understood his phrase, but held his peace.

"Come to think of it, I did hear of them." And he told her of Ismeddin's adventure with the masked intruder the very night of the episode at Tiptoe Inn. "Self-appointed guardians . . . judging from my bit

of eavesdropping that night, your friend's propositions weren't any too savory——"

"No. Which was to be expected. Rumor has it that he holds a high command in the order. The rank and file are honest, deluded bigots who serve as a mask for blackmail, rape, murder, arson, or what'll-you-have, perpetrated by their leaders. Extortion, revenge . . . see how the pretty scheme works out? Camouflaged by piety, virtue, and saffron masks."

And Landon wondered greatly, and marveled at the contrasting crudeness and simplicity of the lands of the Moslem, where he had spent so many hard, fierce years.

"Now tell me," resumed the girl, again glancing about her, "where I am."

"Among friends." And Landon struck the small brazen gong at his side.

"Pardon me. I didn't mean to be inquisitive."

"You may as well improvise some clothes," continued Landon, ignoring his guest's apology, "until I can equip you more suitably." He picked up the torn and soiled scrap of silk that his guest had discarded in favor of his lounge-robe. "This is a bit the worse for wear, you know. Tell me where you live, and I'll call for your baggage in the morning."

Just then Ismeddin, in response to the master's summons, entered with a tray.

"Is that all, *saidi*?"

Landon nodded, whereupon the old man left the master and his guest to sip the night-black Abyssinian coffee he had brought in.

"*Allah akbar!* But she is lovely!" he exulted. "Oh, excellent young woman!"

"Lord, what coffee! You are a mind-reader, stranger. But no, don't go after my clothes. You'll just



draw the whole pack down on both of us. That clown at Tiptoe Inn surely must hold a high command among the Knights, or they'd never have bothered me. Even if I *am* a cabaret singer. That town's no longer safe for me. They'd drag me out of here if they knew I was here, and as for you, helping me this way——"

"The devil you say!" snorted Landon. "You're safe here till the crack of doom. Unless these fellows get siege guns and batter the place down over our ears. And I'll certainly get you some clothes and whatever else you need."

"Don't be foolish," pleaded the girl. "They don't know I'm here. As long as they don't know, we're safe. I'll make the most of things—yes, I have my nerve, but I simply have to invite myself to stay a few days until this mess quiets down, and I can safely leave."

"Fair enough. Just make yourself at home, if you can stand our queer life. See you in the morning!"

And Landon left his guest to nurse her bruises and make herself as comfortable as she could on her improvised couch of several small silk rugs and a few cushions.

THE signs of heaven were approaching the aspect called for in the three tablets; so that even after such an outlandish night, Landon, after leaving his guest, dismissed her from his mind and devoted himself to the rehearsing of the invocations and secret names he was to use in summoning Sarpanit from across the Border. In the seventh stage, high above the plain, face to face with the Lords of the Sign, Landon chanted and beat the tiny drum with knuckles and fingertips until it purred and rolled in that same uncanny rhythm to which the Infidel's Daughter had danced in the pavilion of Koyunjik.

Finally, having reached the end of the ceremonial, Landon arose from his seat at the foot of the altar, gazed through the slits in the vaulted ceiling of the seventh stage and out into the shimmering darkness beyond. In each slit were cross-hairs of fine silver wire so adjusted that at the instant the Lords of the Sign had risen into position, each would be at the intersection of the wires in his particular house: and thus Landon would know that the moment had arrived when the secret name of the Infidel's Daughter was to be pronounced, summoning her into his presence in material form from across the abyss that divides the phantom from its incarnation. And as Landon noted that some of the powers were already approaching their houses, he knew that the others, in the course of but a few days, would swing into the prescribed aspect; knew, and shuddered at the thought of the awful forces which he sought to command, the ruin and ultimate destruction that would be his.

During the next few days Landon saw little of his protégée save at an occasional meal; but those few glimpses were disturbing. The blurred, indefinable accent of her speech stirred a shadowy memory of a memory; and the haunting, half familiarity of her piquant, irregular, almost lovely features upset his poise and self-possession. He found himself from time to time denying with needless vehemence the speech of old Ismeddin, wherein the darvish had suggested that a girl of *Feringhistan* might lure him from his quest of Sarpanit, who was inhumanly jealous.

The girl had amused herself by taking pieces of Hindustani fabrics Landon had given her and improvising quaint, outlandish apparel which seemed to please her enormously: exotic, pagan raiment which made her fit into and become a part of her surroundings.

"You are a clever designer. But you can't wear that outside of the ziggurat. Hadn't I better go to town and get you some clothes in which you could travel?"

"Well . . . yes . . . if I'm in the way . . . or grating on your nerves."

"Oh, not at all," reassured Landon, lying valiantly. "Only, I don't want to keep you here against your best interests. The Knights——"

"Never mind them. Unless I am wearing out my welcome."

"No danger. Just stay away from the seventh stage. And stay away from that bronze door, whatever you do. Otherwise, the place is yours. But remember, keep clear of the seventh stage," concluded Landon solemnly.

That afternoon Landon rode to town for mail which he was not expecting. He returned with a mountainous aggregation of boxes and parcels which by some miracle he contrived to balance on his saddle-bow: civilized apparel, traveling-clothes for his guest, the cabaret girl.

"Ismeddin, take this stuff up to our guest," he commanded.

"Very well, *saidi*," agreed the old man. But for such an agile, sprightly veteran, Ismeddin was strangely clumsy and feeble in his attempts to collect and shoulder the assortment of packages.

"Never mind," countermanded Landon, "I'll take them up in the morning."

And that night, after Landon had gone to the seventh stage to pass through the purification by water and fire, the girl and the darvish met in what she called her throne-room.

"Thanks for the coffee, Ismeddin. But that's not why I rang for you."

"To hear is to obey, *bibi!*"

"Then sit down and listen to me. The master brought home a load of

traveling-clothes for me this evening——"

"Who am I to say?" evaded Ismeddin.

"You needn't say. I know what I know. Now tell me the truth: just how anxious is the master to get me out of here?"

Ismeddin marveled that he could no more resist that girl's compelling eye than he could the master's. And strangely, he did not resent the fact.

"I will tell you the truth. Your presence disturbs the master's studies."

"Indeed?"

The girl's eyebrows rose in sardonic arches; and she smiled as one who is more pleased than amused.

"Then tell me, Ismeddin," she purred in the rippling syllables of a language the darvish had not heard for many months, "tell me what manner of studies he pursues, and how I could possibly disturb his meditations. You can trust me, Ismeddin," she continued, ignoring his amazement at hearing that unexpected language, "and speak to me freely. For I have seen and heard, without having intended to eavesdrop. And I know that you were pleased at my arrival; even as I know also that you did not care to bring me my traveling-clothes this evening . . . oh, but it is very strange, Haaj Ismeddin . . . yet I know many things . . . so tell me more, wise Haaji . . . what manner of studies does the master pursue, and how could I disturb him?"

Again her eyebrows rose in pointed arches; and her eyes smoldered through their long lashes. Loyalty to the master melted under that mordant, burning gaze; reticence and reserve fell asleep, drugged by those rippling, caressing tones of a familiar tongue.

". . . And thus it is," concluded the darvish, "that the master fears that

even your presence in the very basements of this tower would arouse the inhuman jealousy of Sarpanit whom he seeks to summon from across the Border; fears that she will not reveal herself in human form; fears that he will be cheated of his doom and robbed of the fiery destruction of the Hundred and First Kiss which in the end she bestows on her lovers."

"And you, Haaji?" murmured the girl. Strangely enough, she had heard the old man's mad tale of the Infidel's Daughter without surprize or amazement, accepting it as of all things in the world the most logical and reasonable. "And you, Haaj Ismeddin, do you share his fears?"

"I? By the black hands of Abaddon! If you could only save him from himself! Whoever and whatever you are, *bibi* . . . if only . . . but no; you could not even pass the brazen door tomorrow night. Your presence there, in that holy of unholies, would break the powerful spell he intends to chant; and she would not cross the Border. But your being in any other place in this ziggurat would not suffice. And a hundred men could not batter down that heavy door, nor the most cunning smith pick its locks and bars——"

"Once it is closed, no." The girl smiled, and patted her dusky coiffure. "And I will not leave in the morning as he designs, Haaji. . . ."

"ISMEDDIN," began Landon the next morning, as the old man entered with the master's meal of barley cakes and water, "how long must one shelter a stranger who has eaten one's bread and salt?"

"Your enemy may stay three days; and for a whole day after his departure you may not pursue him."

"But this girl is not my enemy. Though her presence——"

"*Saidi*, as long as she does not enter the seventh stage, her presence

makes no difference. So that though she can now leave in safety, you can scarcely send her away. Lawfully, yes; but when did you ever urge a guest to leave? You are not of *Feringhistan*; you could not ask a guest to leave, *saidi*. And she does no harm. If she should enter the seventh stage . . . but she can not do that."

And then the girl herself entered Landon's apartment.

"How can I ever thank you? Those clothes are really adorable. Only . . . forgive me for mentioning it . . . I simply couldn't leave here barefooted."

"Barefooted? Why, I included shoes!"

"Then you must have lost them on the road. I'm so sorry."

"I'll replace them tomorrow. No trouble whatever. But in the meanwhile," concluded Landon, pausing at the door, "I'll be very busy. Surely you'll pardon my haste?"

Ismeddin, following the master, wondered what had become of the pair of shoes that had fallen from a mountainous heap of parcels he had that morning carried to the girl's apartment.

"It is written, *saidi*," observed the old man. "She must stay another day. Surely you could not send her away barefooted."

"Very well then. But tomorrow morning . . . no matter what happens tonight——"

"I understand, *saidi*. If *she* appears from across the Border, the girl will leave."

IT WAS late that night when Landon, in the seventh stage of the ziggurat, completed the final purification by passing through fire. And then, barefooted, and robed in purple, he stepped into the center of a circle of powdered cinnabar which flamed

luridly in the violet light of the adytum of the Infidel's Daughter. On his head was a three-storied miter woven of purple plumage; on his wrists were bracelets of silver, and around his throat he wore a collar of hammered bronze. In his right hand he carried a diadem of curiously wrought silver, and in his left was a tiny drum whose head was of serpent's hide.

At the center of the circle he knelt, bowed low in obeisance, then rose, and advancing toward the altar of unsculptured stone, placed thereon the drum and the diadem.

"Infidel's Daughter, this is the drum to whose cadence you shall dance to the evening star, on the terraces of the house which I have built for you; and this is the diadem you shall wear when you reign in this house which rises to the heavens to meet you: and all this is proof that I sought you on the Mount of the Infidel as you commanded."

Then, inclining his head for a moment, he retreated to the circle of cinnabar, raised his arms, and began his invocation; haltingly at first, and then more surely and firmly as the spirit of those ancient words overcame him.

"Flaming lords of the two horizons and watchers of the treble gates, stand one at the right and one at the left as the star of Sarpanit rises to his throne and rules over his sign," he intoned as he gazed through the central cruciform cleft in the ceiling, looking out into blackness beyond that great height. "And you, dark princes of Aralû, open the gates of that dim land where you keep her imprisoned, and release her once more to spread gladness and wo without end over this earth which dries and wanes, lacking her presence. Hear ye, hear ye, hear ye, dark lords and shining presences, and by your secret names which I know and can

pronounce, hear ye and obey my will."

Pausing in his invocation, he drew from a pouch at his girdle a small vial whose contents he poured in a circle about him, concentric to, and within the circle of cinnabar. And as the fluid touched the floor, it burst into quivering, lapping flames whose spectral blueness exhaled a poison-sweetness which overwhelmed the dense fumes rising from the censers that smoldered at each side of the altar.

"*Belît Nûri*," he resumed, "light of heaven and earth, Sarpanit, shining torch of heaven, return from Aralû! Seven times and seven times have I passed through fire; food have I not eaten; sorrow was my nourishment; water have I not drunk; grief was for my thirst. I am Adôn, for whom you wept; I am the Lord of the Great House; I am the builder of the Ziggurat; and it is I who call you from Aralû, from the gloomy realm of Ereshkigal; it is I who summon you from across the Border, *Belît Nûri*, Lady of Light!"

Statuesquely, with formal precision, he made gestures reminiscent of the mitered kings who in the lower halls of the ziggurat rode to battle and poured libations on lofty altars. And all the while he chanted in that dim, forgotten tongue, summoning the Infidel's Daughter from across the Border.

"It is I who seek you, *Bint el Kafir* who danced before me on the mound of Koyunjik; therefore ride on your lions past the throne of Allatu, and appear before me, Sarpanit, Bright and Shining One!"

The Lord of the Sign rose into the predicted configuration. Great clouds of purple smoke, choking and blinding, rose from the censers and overwhelmed Landon with their awful sweetness; but still he chanted. And then as the star hung for an instant

on the silver cross-hair in the cleft, flaming like an incandescent bead on a string of light, he raised his arms and called in a great voice that final word, the uttermost and hidden name of the Infidel's Daughter: "Come from across the Border, *Kadishtu!*"

The blue flames shrank into blackness. Landon collapsed, sprawling across the edge of the cinnabar circle. His three-staged miter rolled to the foot of the altar. Uncrowned, and mocked by the star that flamed its way up the silver cross-hair, Landon lay senseless in the darkness of the shrine sacred to the Bright and Shining One.

## 3

THAT very evening, shortly after nightfall, the Knights of the Saffron Mask met in secret conclave. Under cover of darkness they slunk in pairs down side streets and alleys, uncouth figures in robes and miters, converging in all directions toward their rendezvous in the basement of a house at the outskirts of the village.

"Good evening, Brethren," greeted the Grand Master with punctilious solemnity as he ascended the rostrum. "Be seated."

Whereat the Knights took seats and respectfully awaited the opening of the Book of Seals, wherein were inscribed not only the rules and minutes of the Order, but also, in the appendix, the names of offenders, actual as well as prospective; the list of the proscribed, and the proceedings instituted against them.

"Tonight," began the Grand Master, "we shall try and sentence this Landon whose manifold iniquities have become a disgrace and a scandal to this Christian community. Brethren, what is your good pleasure?"

"Let him be tried," intoned forty voices in the monotone of a litany; "and let him be sentenced; and let

this sentence be forthwith executed."

"Who prefers a charge?"

A dozen robed figures leaped to their feet.

With a gesture the Grand Master yielded the floor to one of them.

"Master," began the Knight, "this man is an infidel; he worships the sun and moon and the hosts of heaven."

"What proof have you?" demanded the Grand Master.

"I've seen him on the terraces of his tower, making strange gestures to the evening star, and bowing to the morning star."

"For this he shall be stripped and flogged and driven from the county," decreed the Master.

"Let it be recorded," chanted the assemblage in unison.

The Scribe at the Grand Master's elbow wrote on the pages of the Book of Seals.

"What further charges?" demanded the chief, and again singled out one of those who had taken the floor.

"He's an atheist. One day when he was riding through town, the parson invited him to attend church; and this Landon thanked him with supercilious politeness, but told him he didn't believe in churches."

And before the Scribe could record this charge, another Knight assumed the floor.

"This man is a blasphemer: he claims his tower will outlast the world itself."

"H-m-m . . . yes, that is blasphemy. Scribe, did you get that?" demanded the Grand Master, lapsing from the stilted phrases of the ritual. "What else have we got on this fellow?"

"He's living with that de las Torres woman we ran out of town a while ago," ventured another, un-

easily as though picking his way over quicksands.

"The devil he is!" flared the Grand Master. "How do you know?"

"Well, me and Judson were watching that tower with a field-glass one evening, and we saw her dancing on the what did you call it——"

"Terrace?"

"Yeah. Terrace, that's the word. Something like a Hula dance, only worse. And what little clothes she did wear was scandalous."

"So that bird found herself a home, did she? After we told her to clear out?"

"Ain't nothin' else but that, Master."

"Did he get our warning letter, telling him to get rid of the girl?"

"Sure did, Master. I saw him at the post-office, readin' it, and then he tore it up and grinned. And a couple of days later, he came to town to get her some clothes and trappings."

"Enough!" thundered the Grand Master, resuming his dignity. "Order, please! We have enough to hang this fellow a dozen times. And especially the girl, the way she was corrupting the town."

At this last remark, several Knights turned their masked faces and choked coughs which sounded strangely like snickers.

"We'll take the place by surprize. Tonight. He has only that one old man for a servant. Right?"

"You said it, Master. But he's a hard old duffer. Nearly strangled me one night I tried to look into things while his boss was away," replied one of the forty.

"Does he always leave his front door open?" continued the Grand Master.

"Used to. But now he keeps it barred."

"Any secret entrances or exits from which he could escape?"

"There used to be," announced a Knight who had worked as a laborer during the construction of the ziggurat. "But they've been blocked up."

"Well, then we've got him sewed up," declared the Master. "But how about that front door? I hear it's made of heavy steel bars we couldn't saw in a month of Sundays."

"That's simple," volunteered one of the conclave. "I'll take an acetylene torch from my shop, and we can cut those bars in a few minutes, even if they're a couple of inches thick. Easy enough."

"Very good, Brother. All of you, at 2 a. m., be prepared to raid him. We'll tar and feather the both of them. Or, while we're at it . . . yes, bring some rope; we might change our minds. Remember, we start from here at 2 a. m. Dismissed!"

The Knights rose and bowed; the Grand Master acknowledged their reverence; and the conclave dissolved.

"To hell with the man," muttered the Grand Master as he stepped from the rostrum. "It's that hell-cat's hide I want." And he wiped his chin in memory of a certain tête-à-tête in a booth at Tiptoe Inn.

## 4

A SLENDER, nebulous presence emerged from the shadows of the holy of holies of the seventh stage of the ziggurat, coming from behind the hangings to the left of the altar and picking its way through the gloom. The apparition paused at the altar steps and one by one struck light to the fifteen sacred candles before the shrine. Then, turning from the altar, the girl knelt beside the ziggurat builder.

"Couldn't you wait . . . did you have to cross the Border to meet her?"

The touch of her fingertips and the murmur of her voice aroused Landon.

"Sarpanit . . . Bright and Shining One . . ." he muttered as he opened his eyes. Then, collecting himself, and in the flickering light of the candles recognizing his protégée: "You! What are *you* doing here? Flames and damnation!" he thundered, rising and snatching the girl to her feet, "You and your curiosity! . . . Meddling fool!" he continued; and then, releasing her wrist, glared at her, transfixing her for an age-long instant with the mordant hatred of his eyes. "If strangling you would do any good . . ."

A petty rage is expressed in violence; but a great wrath can not quite conceive the vengeance for which it blindly gropes: so that Landon, instead of tearing his evil genius into small pieces, seated himself wearily on the altar steps, head bowed in despair, shoulders drooping with the burden of adventurous years, perilous quests, soul-racking studies and speculations; beaten, cracked, broken; a colossus shattered by an idle gust of wind.

"Sarpanit . . . Bright and Shining One . . . I have failed you. . . ."

"You *have* failed me," breathed a voice at his side, speaking in the rippling, forgotten tongue of Agade. "Looked me full in the face and did not see me. . . . Look again, *Adôn!* *Adôn*, for whom I once went into mourning, in another avatar. . . ."

The girl took the silver diadem from the altar, set it upon the abysmal blackness of her hair, patted her dusky coiffure, and smilingly regarded Landon. The piquant irregularity of her features was softening into a loveliness the like of which he had seen but once before: the cabaret girl he had a moment before cursed

as his evil genius was before his very eyes merging her identity with that of the apparition which had once danced in the pavilion on the mound of Koyunjik. The girl and the vision were fusing into one, into a radiant and unbelievable beauty.

"*Bint el Kafir!*" Landon stared incredulously as one who has thrust upon him in one swift moment all the confusion and doubt of a lifetime. "Infidel's Daughter . . . and yet a moment ago . . . Sarpanit!"

And before that unearthly radiance Landon sank to his knees, stricken with an overwhelming wonder; forgetful of all save the transfiguration, the immeasurable loveliness of the Infidel's Daughter, whose low voice murmured incredible words.

"You have seen, and now you believe. Ismeddin sought to save you from your fate by putting your computations in error, so that the stars to which you chanted your mummeries were not those that ruled my avatar. Yet he knew that by the force of your desire you might call me from across the Border; and thus, despite his deception, he was uneasy, and conspired with the cabaret girl, your guest, to tempt you from Sarpanit incarnate and tangible. But it made little difference what you said, what rites you performed or omitted, what stars were at the zenith or nadir. I am here, *Adôn*, as I promised. . . ."

Landon raised his eyes, then dropped them before the increasing splendor and glory of the Infidel's Daughter.

"It mattered little," she continued, "for the force of your desire and the spell of your vision sufficed. I danced before you in your pavilion at Koyunjik, and sang to you of the Hundred and One Strange Kisses. And I whispered in your ear the missing name, the hidden name which even Ismeddin did not know . . . *Ka-dishtu*. . . . Now do you believe?"

“Thus *despite* the mummeries you performed, *despite* the ziggurat you built, I came from across the Border and assumed mortal form. Therefore rise, and admire the full splendor of that which you yourself created: *for there are no gods save only those created by the fancy of man.*”

And Landon, godlike and exalted, rose to claim the first of the Hundred and One Strange Kisses.

## 5

**I**N ACCORDANCE with their plan, the saffron-robed avengers gathered in the grove about the ziggurat, and in double column marched to the massive gate which, as they had expected, was locked and barred.

One of the Knights drew from beneath his robe a small cylinder of acetylene; another had regulating valves, a torch, and hose; and finally, a small cylinder of compressed oxygen. These parts were swiftly assembled; then the striking of a match, and a broad flare of flame which diminished in size and increased in intensity as the oxygen was cut in: so that when it was adjusted, there was but a fine pencil of blue-white flame, an eighth of an inch long, but of dazzling, unearthly brilliance. The Knights averted their faces as one of their number advanced with the hissing tip of flame and applied it to one of the bars. A tiny spot on the metal became red-hot; and then, as the operator released the cutting jet, a shower of incandescent steel sprayed onto the paving; and in a few seconds the bar was cut clean as though sawed through. Again and again the torch was applied, until five bars were cut. And then the flame was cut off, leaving the darkness trebly black by contrast.

The avengers paused, awestricken by the black depths beyond them.

“Follow me!” commanded the Grand Master, stepping forward into the breach.

One of the Knights flashed an electric torch. Another followed suit. Slim pencils of light revealed a staircase leading to the second stage of the ziggurat. Noiseless as shadows they picked their way up thickly carpeted steps.

Not a word was whispered. The silence hung like an oppressing fog. And then the Knights, emerging on the second stage of the ziggurat, found themselves in a room pervaded with a pale, shimmering twilight, which revealed the ascent to the succeeding stage, flanked by grim, foreboding figures of winged bulls whose human heads, bearded and mitered, stared solemnly at the invaders.

Out of the shadows leaped a white-bearded apparition: Ismeddin, seeing that flight was impossible, was determined to render a good account of himself. Twice he fired; and then his pistol jammed. His long-bladed kanijar rose and fell in the *melée*, until the tap of a blackjack swept away the old man's senses in one paralyzing instant.

The wounded were carried to the ground level; the remainder advanced, searching each apartment of the lower stages, working their way up, stage by stage, to the last, at whose great door they paused.

Out of the silence came the rich tones of him they sought, lifting his voice in sonorous, foreign accents: and then the tinkle of bracelets, and a woman's laughter.

“We've got them both!” exulted the Grand Master. He tried the door; found it barred. “Bring on the torch!”

Again that fierce flame flared wide, and then drew down to a pencil of

(Continued on page 860)



## The Infidel's Daughter

(Continued from page 752)

dazzling blue whiteness. But this time in vain: for the massive door of the seventh stage was of plates and ponderous bars of bronze, against which no cutting torch can operate.

Hammers, chisels, hatchets and bars of iron were drawn from beneath the saffron robes of the Knights: and likewise, in anticipation of their ultimate entry, they produced and laid to one side cords, whips, and small cans of oil.

### 6

"*Adôn,*" murmured the Infidel's Daughter as she withdrew from Landon's embrace, "they have come to take the cabaret girl."

"What?"

"Yes. Listen. . . ."

A dull tapping; and then a voice from without muffled by the thickness of the massive door.

"Let us in. We only want the girl."

"Come in and get her!" mocked Landon.

"If we have to force this door, *you'll* get what's coming to *her*."

"Try and force it!" And then, to the girl: "There is no other exit. Still——" And his eye paused, regarding an ancient, bull-headed mace that hung on the wall. "I'll give them a surprize."

He advanced toward the ponderous door.

"Don't!" protested the Infidel's Daughter.

"Single-handed——"

"No. In this ziggurat you called me from the shadows. Away from

(Continued on page 862)

(Continued from page 860)

here I can have no existence. The mortal frame of her who sought shelter with you has been consumed in the fire of your vision, so that she is not; nor was she ever. You, you can leave; single-handed, fight your way out. But me you must leave behind, if you leave at all."

"Fight my way out, and leave you behind?"

"Yes. For they can not harm or even touch me. The cabaret girl, yes; but not *Bint el Kafir*, not Sarpant who has crossed the Border."

The besiegers were making no headway, no impression on the massive door which a hundred men with battering rams could not force.

"Nor can they pass that door until your vision has been fulfilled to the uttermost——"

"What further, *Kadishtu?*" wondered Landon, drunk with the splendor from across the Border.

"Thus far I have not overstepped human bounds; nor did I intend to until the end of this avatar, a long time from this first evening. For you are a man after my own heart, *Adon*, and no mortal woman could love you as I do: so that I would have withheld the Hundred and First Kiss until the Lords of the Sign recalled me, for no mortal may live to tell of its mystery. But those meddling fools——"

She evaded his embrace, then continued, "But think well, *Adon*. You can fight your way to freedom and escape. Me they will not find, for now I am not, save in your mind alone. The one they think they seek, the cabaret girl, has ceased to exist: for she served but to bring me to you. Therefore save yourself. And go your way, knowing what you have done. Knowing also that there is nothing before you: for you can not a second time call me from across the

Border. If you wish . . . take your vision to its uttermost, and be consumed entirely, even as was Naramsin of Agade, whom you saw asleep in my villa on Djeb el Kafir . . . or go your way, to live long and emptily, without having tasted the fullness of your destiny. That door will hold until you open it to scatter those fools before you . . . or until like Naramsin you have been calcined in the mystery of the Hundred and First Kiss. . . . Choose, *Adôn!*”

Forgotten were the vengeful Knights who vainly battered the massive brazen door; forgotten was all peril, all the past and its multitudinous turmoils and imbroglios; forgotten all save the wonder and radiance of the Infidel's Daughter, Sarpanit whom he had called from across the Border, the Bright and Shining One whose smoldering eyes transfixed him, whose serpentine arms invited him, whose low, rippling voice murmured of incredible bliss and wonder beyond human endurance.

Landon dropped the heavy mace and turned from the brazen door.

“I have chosen.”

The Lord of the Sign flamed fiercely as a bead of flame threaded on a silver wire. . . .

**E**VEN bronze has its limits. So that, failing by sheer force, the Knights finally succeeded with mallets and chisels. As the great door yielded, they wondered at the silence within, and at the overpowering, deadly sweetness that enveloped them, a dizzying, intoxicating, maddening sweetness that made their senses whirl and falter in confusion.

The Knights in their amazement forgot the girl they sought, and stared at the exalted, godlike features of the sleeper, that fierce outlaw whose hard eyes and haughty air had

so long baffled them. On the shoulder of his purple robe they saw a strand of blue-black hair. On his forehead was a rosy imprint, as of the kiss of heavily rouged lips.

"Come to life!" growled the Grand Master with nervous gruffness. Then, remembering his mission: "Where is she?"

He shook the sleeper by the shoulder.

"*Lord Christ!*" he shrieked; "*nothing but skin and bones!*"

"Nothing but skin and bones!" echoed a mocking, deathly bitter voice from the shadows of the far corner of the shrine. The Infidel's Daughter, wraithlike, shadowy as a wisp of smoke, confronted them. "Fools! Meddlers!" continued that passionless, cold voice: "To save him from your stupidity which would have killed his soul too many years in advance of his body, I took the life of him who evoked me from the shadows and gave me human form. So take what is left of him . . . *skin and bones!*"

Her laugh was like the touch of a frosty blade . . . like the whisperings of an evil spirit.

The Grand Master was the first to reach the door. He tripped on his saffron robe, fell headlong down the stairs. And before sunrise he died, babbling of skin and bones, and of a girl and her poisonous, evil laugh.

As the sun rose, Ismeddin, whose tough skull had survived the blow that had stunned him, emerged from behind the winged bull where the invaders had tossed him.

The old man knew better than to touch the form of his master, or to disturb the curiously wrought silver diadem that lay in the hollow of Landon's shoulder.

"He found her in spite of me . . . and perhaps he will forgive my treason. . . ." And then, with profound obeisance, "*Es salaam aleika, saidi!*"