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Contents for January, 1925

Cover Design.....	Andrew Brosnatch	
Invaders From Outside.....	J. Schlossel	5
<i>A Planet From Outer Space Wages War on the Twelve Worlds</i>		
The Electric Chair.....	George Waight	17
<i>Death Faced Him—or Else the Grisly Horror of an Unknown Fate</i>		
As Obligated.....	Armstrong Livingston	26
<i>The Baronet's Bathroom Bell Was Bewitched</i>		
The Rajah's Gift.....	E. Hoffmann Price	35
<i>Oriental Tale—One Crowded Hour of Glorious Life</i>		
The Fireplace.....	Henry S. Whitehead	40
<i>A Weird Murder—and a Ghostly Revenge</i>		
White Man's Madness.....	Lenore E. Chaney	49
<i>Last of the Incas—the Lure of Gold</i>		
Red and Black.....	Irvin Mattick	67
<i>Yong Lo Was a Reptile with an Artist's Soul</i>		

(Continued on Next Page)

(Continued from Preceding Page)

When We Killed Thompson	Strickland Gillilan	73
<i>For Thirty Years He Believed Himself a Murderer</i>		
Wings of Power (First Part)	Lady Anne Bonny	77
<i>Three-part Pseudo-Scientific Novel</i>		
Out of the Long Ago	Seabury Quinn	95
<i>Werewolves—a Tale of Heredity</i>		
On the Highway	Cargray Cook	106
<i>Wild Automobile Ride, with Death at the Wheel</i>		
The Ocean Leech	Frank Belknap Long, Jr.	109
<i>Uncanny Monster Oozes Over the Side of a Ship</i>		
Two Crows	Francis Hard	115
<i>Verse</i>		
Fog	C. Franklin Miller	116
<i>Prehistoric Patagonian Monsters—a Tale of Stark Terror</i>		
Luisma's Return	Arthur J. Burks	123
<i>Haiti—Death of Henri I, Emperor of the North</i>		
A Changeling Soul	Victor Lauriston	129
<i>Tale of Tangled Personalities</i>		
The Specter Priestess of Wrightstone	Herman F. Wright	134
<i>Ghostly Legend of an English Castle</i>		
The Valley of Teeheemen (Conclusion)	Arthur Thatcher	138
<i>Two-part Novel—Strange Valley in South America</i>		
The Remorse of Professor Panebianco	Greya La Spina	157
<i>Scientist Tries to Find the Physical Qualities of the Human Soul</i>		
Arhl-a of the Caves	C. M. Eddy, Jr.	163
<i>Zurd the Coward—and the Love of Arhl-a for Wagh the Mighty</i>		
The Festival	H. P. Lovecraft	169
<i>Eldritch Tale of New England Witchcraft</i>		
Phantoms	Laurence R. D'Orsay	175
<i>Crime—Dope—and a Haunted Conscience</i>		
The Eyrie		179
<i>A Chat With the Readers</i>		

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STRANGE tales are told of the rajah of Lacra-Kai, of the justice he dealt, of the rewards he gave; but the strangest of all these many tales is that of the gift he gave to Zaid, the Persian who had served him long and well. A crafty man was the rajah, an eastern Machiavelli who by his devices had retained the sovereignty of his petty state almost unimpaired by British rule; a keen, shrewd diplomat, a polished cosmopolitan, an oriental wearing a thick veneer of European culture. In short, he was an enlightened monarch, a tributary prince who was left quite to his own devices as regarded the internal administration of his state. But it is of his gift to Zaid whereof we are to deal.

In the privacy of his palace, screened from the view of his people, the rajah was quite European, dispensing with the pomp and glitter and formality that is supposed to surround all eastern potentates at all times. Therefore it was that Zaid the Persian, who had served his master long and well, not only sat, but also smoked in the royal presence as he listened to the words of his lord.

"Zaid," the prince was saying, "but for your courage and fidelity I would surely have been assassinated; therefore have I summoned you this afternoon so that you may receive some token of my gratitude. Name whatsoever you desire and it shall be yours, for I mean to reward you richly."

"My lord," replied Zaid, "there is but one request that I would make, and that is mad beyond all conception of madness. . . ."

"Nevertheless, let me hear it; tell me what is on your mind. Forget that I am rajah of Lacra-Kai, and consider me but as your friend who is indebted to you; therefore speak freely."

"For ten years I have been favored by your munificence," began Zaid, speaking slowly. "For ten years I have been the friend of kings; but all that is nothing."

Zaid paused. A far-away look had crept over his features; he seemed to be gazing through and beyond the rajah, and back to some dimly remembered, almost forgotten episode of the past. And then, picking his words as one groping in the dark picks his

steps, he told how, twenty years previous, he had stood on the edge of the crowd in the square before the great temple of Kali, awaiting the arrival of the procession at whose head the present rajah would be riding. Zaid, a boy scarcely a dozen years old, ragged, dirty, half starved, part of the scum of an eastern city, stood that day to watch the rajah ride past in state. All the color and magnificence, all the barbaric pomp of that oriental court was there, dazzling, the concentrated, fiery splendor that marked a prince's accession to his throne. And all this the boy saw, yet saw not, for he had eyes for none but the rajah. High above the crowd, on the back of a great elephant he sat, dark, calm, impassive, and arrogant as a god. Not as a man, exultant, but rather as some high, passionless fate solemnly advancing across the wastes of space. The prince was oblivious of the pomp and splendor, oblivious of the tumult and applause: on that day it seemed to Zaid that he saw not a man, but destiny itself in march. And as the rajah drew near, the great temple gong clanged with a reverberation that seemed to shake the very base of the universe: a strange, unearthly vibration that mingled with the resonance of brass the hiss of serpents and the rustle of silk: a sound that rose and fell, resonant, sonorous, awful. Through all this the rajah sat calm and inscrutable, above all exultation, above all human emotion. But at the sound of that gong, at the sight of that hard, impassive face, a great madness possessed Zaid, so that his blood became as a stream of flame. And he swore that he, too, would some day ride in such a procession, would bear himself with that same godlike hauteur, that same superb arrogance; he, Zaid, hungry beggar lad and scum of the streets, dared have such a vision.

Silent were the gongs; vanished the procession; and the new rajah ruled

in Laera-Kai. But with Zaid the vision remained, following him over half the earth, and returning with him to Laera-Kai, where, ten years later, he entered the service of that same rajah, and, by strange turns of fortune, rose to rank and power in that same court; for in the East all things are possible. Who has not heard of the blacksmith who founded the Sassanian dynasty that once ruled Persia?

Such was the tale Zaid told the rajah.

“**A**S STRANGE a tale as I have ever heard,” mused the prince. “You have indeed prospered.” Then, suddenly, “And all this is apropos of what?”

Zaid started, as one waking from a dream, then laughed oddly.

“Hear my desire, then deal with me as you will. For twenty years that vision has haunted me. Much has happened since then; much have I seen and experienced, but through it all, this mad desire has persisted. And at last it happened that I entered your service, and that, having served you well, it has pleased you to grant me whatsoever I might desire. Therefore, seeing that this great madness has haunted me all these years, I make this request: that I be permitted to ride in state as I saw you ride twenty years ago, so that I may fulfil the oath I then swore.”

Whereat the rajah replied in the tone of one who denies some child a dangerous toy: “Fool! To grant you that favor would be to sign your death-warrant. Were you to ride thus at noon, poison or dagger would find you before dawn; for no man may enjoy such a mark of favor and live. What? Have you lived in this land all these years and do not realize the penalty you would pay? Consider a moment: my son is dead; the succession to the throne lay among my three nephews. One of them sought

to hasten his succession. The plot was discovered, and the plotter I punished by showing him a mark of extraordinary favor. Immediately it was rumored about that I had selected him as my heir; and within ten days he died. But not by my command, for that was superfluous. The princes of the blood, and the lords of the court. . . ."

The rajah made a suggestive, sweeping gesture with his hand, then continued, "Me you were able to save from assassination; yourself you could not save, nor could I save you. You would ride in state; rumors would drift about. And you know the rest."

"Even so, my lord; I know the rest. But I will take my chance. It is not good for a man to cherish a vision, however mad, without having made some effort to attain it."

"Think again, Zaid, think again! Cast aside your insanity. Choose whatsoever else you will . . . a lakh of rupees ten lakhs if you will jewels the like of which you have never dreamed and I have a dancing girl whose equal is not to be found in the entire world all this, and more, is yours, for you have served me well; it is to you that I owe my life. Be reasonable, friend, be reasonable."

"Be reasonable? That is the one command I can not obey, for in me there is no reason. This mad vision has haunted me entirely too long. So, though it may cost me my life, as surely it may, let me see it to a finish. For there at least would be a roundness, a completeness to my career that in no way else could I attain. In the square before the great temple of Kali I found the inspiration that led me to enter your service, to attain your favor, to serve you well; and in that same square, if need be, I will meet my doom. The cycle will be complete. After that, let come what may, for I shall have cheated destiny of the rare

gift of satisfaction, the gift so often denied to kings. And after all, is the assassin so sure of finding me? Is that conclusion inevitable?"

The rajah smiled as one upon whom great understanding has suddenly descended.

"Zaid," he said, "you are more than ever a man after my own heart. Mad you are, stark mad and raving; I understand, for I, too, have been haunted by visions. But none has understood my thoughts, even as none would understand your mad desire. It would be misconstrued, and you know the result."

SUDDENLY the rajah arose.

"Come, Zaid, let me tempt you with the things I have but named."

And Zaid was led through subterranean vaults, treasure vaults full of gilded arms and armor, trays of flaming jewels, great chests of age-old coins, dinars and mohurs of gold, the secreted plunder of a hundred generations.

"All this leaves you unmoved? Then let me try again."

The Persian accompanied his master to the very heart of the palace, to a hall overshadowed with twilight—a broad, spacious hall whose walls were curiously carved with strange figures in unnamably odd postures, engaged in unmentionable diversions. And then his ears were caressed by the soft, sensuously wailing notes of reed and stringed instruments: his senses were stirred by the dull pulsing of atabals, throbbing like a heart racked with passion. And through the purple gloom of incense fumes he saw the lithe, swaying, gilded bodies of dancing girls, slim and wondrously beautiful. One, emerging from the figures of the dance, slowly advanced and made obeisance before the rajah.

"And this is Nilofal, the matchless bayadere, she whose equal is not to be found in the entire world. Should she please you. . . ."

The Persian, lost in admiration, saw that she was perfection incarnate, outstripping the maddest flight of the most voluptuous fancy. But when he turned to reply, the rajah had disappeared; and the door through which they had entered was barred.

What allurements, what sorceries, what fascinations Nilofal used to entice the fancy of Zaid during those three days, we shall never know. Suffice it to say that she failed in her efforts to separate the Persian from his madness.

Once again Zaid stood before the rajah, who smiled with the air of one whose cleverness has just reaped its reward in the solution of a difficult problem.

"What now, Zaid? Was Nilofal to your taste? Surely she must have been; and certainly she is worth all the dreams that have haunted men since the beginning of time."

"My lord," replied the Persian, "you have tempted me as man has never before been tempted; yet am I to sacrifice the vision of twenty years in favor of a treasure vault and a lupanar? Although you may refuse it, I nevertheless hold fast to my first desire."

"So be it then; and tomorrow at noon you shall see it satisfied."

And then and there were preparations made for Zaid to ride in royal state through the streets of Laera-Kai.

NOON the next day. The rajah, watching from the roof of his palace, saw Zaid in the gilded howdah, mounted on the great elephant that carried none but princes of the blood. Calm and serene and godlike sat the Persian: a king he seemed, and the descendant of a hundred kings, for at that moment he was about to fulfil his destiny. Once again a great understanding descended upon the rajah.

"It was wrong indeed that I tried to dissuade him," reflected the rajah,

"for whatever the end may be, it will be as nothing; Zaid is about to accomplish that which he set out to do when he was a beggar, a hungry, nameless urchin. There is something great and heroic in this madness . . . but what will happen when he passes the temple of Kāli? Can he ever become a man again? . . . for in his madness he is more than a man; he has overturned destiny to fulfil a childish fancy. . . ."

And the prince, watching the procession get under way, was lost in admiration of the man who for half an hour would be rajah.

"And having attained his dream, will not the man Zaid have died, though he live a hundred years thereafter in security? And what would life mean to him?"

The procession, turning, had taken Zaid from the rajah's view. Bestirring himself from his reverie, he whispered a few words to Al Tarik, his trusted servant.

". . . And do not fail me in the slightest detail."

The rajah repeated his instructions. Al Tarik departed. And in the meanwhile, Zaid rode to the fulfilment of his dream.

Through the streets of Laera-Kai the procession wound. The Persian, as in a dream, bore himself not as a man but as the avatar of some god returning to judge the world. Vanity? A love of pomp? No; surely not that. Rather was it that strange madness that overwhelms men when they snatch from fate the achievement of a vision. On and on he rode, like the slow, sure march of destiny, immutable, irresistible. And but one thought flitted through his brain, the words of some long forgotten sage: "When indeed they do grant to a man the realization of his dream, they straightway reach forth to snatch from him his prize, lest in his triumph he become godlike and gaily toss them from their lofty thrones." His lips curled

in the shadow of a smile, for swift indeed would have to be their envy to defeat him; the great temple of Kali was at hand. He was approaching the square where, twenty years ago, an obscure nobody, a starving beggar, a mere boy, he had seen the vision that now was materializing. And then the great gong in the temple rang, reverberating like the crash of doom, filling the entire universe with its shivering resonance—full-throated, colossal, then hissing with the rustle of silk—a sound that swelled, and died, and rose again.

As slowly as some animated Juggernaut the royal elephant advanced, pace by pace, deliberately, majestically, as though each step took him from world to world. And again the gong, touched to life by the mallet wielded by a temple slave, rolled forth its sonorous, vibrant crash.

A few more steps, and Zaid, the Persian, whom the rajah loved to honor, was before the temple of Kali. High and arrogant was he, as Rama going forth to conquer the world; no longer a man, but transfigured beyond recognition. Again the temple gong gave forth its vibrant note, reverberant, awful; diminishing, then

rising and swelling again. And the god, who but half an hour before had been Zaid, the Persian, toppled forward in the gilded howdah. The last roll of the gong had masked the smacking report of a high-powered rifle.

THAT evening the rajah gazed at the body of the man who had served him well, the man he had esteemed and loved as a friend. Pity and sorrow were on his lean, hard features; but regret was absent.

“A king and more than a king,” he soliloquized, as he regarded the still, transfigured face of the Persian. “A madman, perhaps—or the avatar of a god, for by his own efforts he rounded his destiny. The cycle is complete, from the temple of Kali, and back again; the circle has closed upon itself. Yes, it is well that I commanded Al Tarik to fire before Zaid endured the agony of becoming mortal again. . . .”

Such was the gift of the rajah of Lacra-Kai. Yet once, at least, though he did not know it, the rajah had made a futile move: the shot of Al Tarik had missed; and there was no wound on the Persian's body.