

"THE VALLEY OF THE ASSASSINS" - - - Edmond Hamilton

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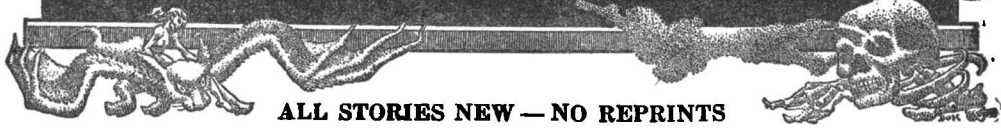
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 of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.*

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor.

LAMONT BUCHANAN, Associate Editor.

The Valley of the Assassins

MARK STANTON felt sharp premonition of disaster as he heard the distant chorus of yells from his native laborers. There was stark terror in that shout of the hundred-odd Persian workers.

"The peacock of death!" they were babbling in the native Iranian tongue. "It is the sign of the Sons of Murder!"

"The Sons of Murder?" repeated Stanton. "What the devil's got into them now? Come on, Billy."

The young American chief-engineer started on the run along the sun-scorched single railway track. His chunky, muscular, khaki-clad figure was spurred by an alarm which was mirrored in his square brown face and hard black eyes.

Billy Bradley, his youthful assistant in the job of maintaining this section of the

Trans-Iranian Railway, hastily followed him around the bend of the winding track, toward the source of the noisy clamor of terror.

The track wound between the looming precipices of the tremendous Elburz Mountains, that mighty range whose unmapped peaks and cliffs wall northern Iran from the Caspian. Vast, rocky shoulders rose in climbing heights of mystery toward the towering peak of Demavend.

This wilderness was one of the least-known regions of the whole Middle East, indeed, of all Asia. And this frail single thread of railway that ran through its frowning passes to the Caspian was the most vital railway in the world. It was the Burma Road of Russia—the single highway along which American and English munitions could flow to the embattled Soviets.



*The mindless Sons of Murder are feared for what they are—
but more for whom they serve!*



That was why American engineers were here to keep it operating.

Mark Stanton had that urgent necessity on his mind as he ran forward. "If the men stop work now, we'll never get that slide cleared away. And not a train can run until we do!"

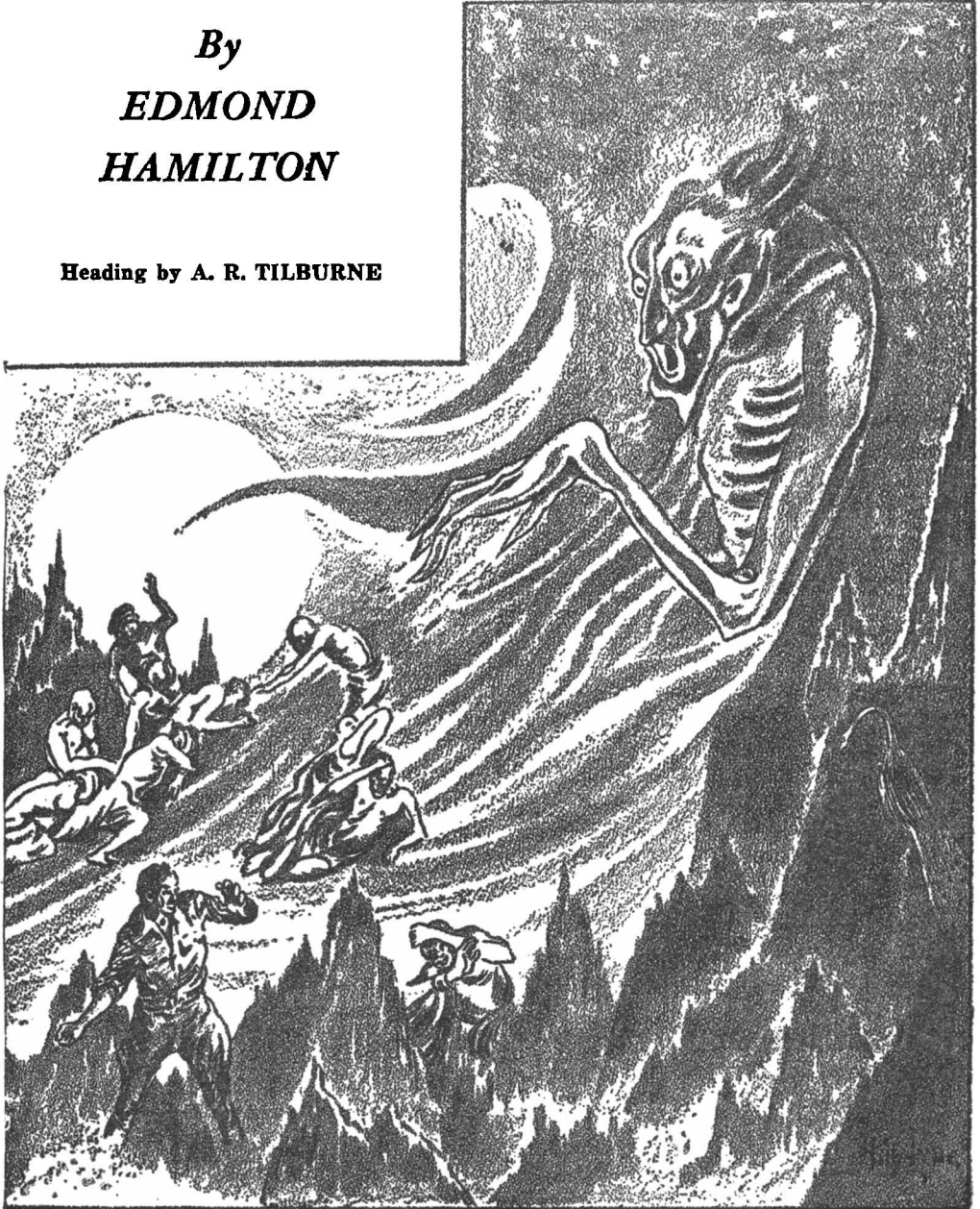
"They seem scared to death," muttered young Billy Bradley as they rounded the curve. "What's the matter with them, anyway?"

Stanton and his assistant engineer had come into view of the catastrophic rock-slide that for a week had blocked all traf-



By
**EDMOND
HAMILTON**

Heading by A. R. TILBURNE



fic. The great mass of rocks across the pass was not large now, for the Persian workers had been toiling for six days to remove it.

But the dark-faced Persians were not plying pick and shovel now. They had thrown down their tools and formed a panic-stricken mob which was trying to bolt down the track toward the camp. The lank, towering figure of Angus McLachlan, Scotch second engineer, was all that held them back.

Stanton shouted harshly to the white-clad, dark-faced throng, in Persian. "Get back there! What do you mean by stopping work? Is it for this that we're paying you triple wages?"

"We work here no longer, *khan!*" yelled a terrified Persian who was in the front of the mob. "The shadow of death lies over this place. The Sons of Murder have given us warning to leave."

"The Sons of Murder? What are you talking about?" Stanton demanded.

"The Assassins!" screeched another Persian. His face was a muddy gray with terror. They all surged forward, with that man in the lead.

WHACK! Stanton's hard fist caught the ringleader on the jaw, and the man went down like a poled ox. The others halted.

"Anyone else who tries to desert his work will get the same medicine," Stanton promised.

The men sullenly faced him, muttering to each other and looking behind them at the half-cleared mass of rock with dread in their faces.

Fizar Khan, the middle-aged Persian official who was attached to Stanton's camp, came hurrying to the scene. He looked worried.

"What has happened here?" he asked quickly.

"Yes, what the devil set them off, Mac?"

Stanton asked the tall second engineer.

The big Scot shrugged bony shoulders, his craggy face dour as he spat contemptuously on the ground.

"Ah, the chiels are crazy," growled McLachlan. "They came up here with me to work, same as any other morning. Then they went out of their wits, because they happened to see yon bird."

He pointed at the creature that was the focus of the Persian workers' scared glances. Upon the mass of rock that blocked the track there perched a black peacock of unusual size.

The bird was tethered to the rock, by a cord attached to its leg. It was strutting its great tail as though in anger, uttering a discordant cry. Underneath it, on the rock, was scrawled a curious cabalistic symbol in bright red.

Fizar Khan's olive face went sickly yellow as he looked. "*Inshallah!*" he muttered hoarsely. "It is the warning of the Assassins!"

"What is all this stuff about Assassins?" Billy Bradley demanded puzzledly. "Why should that peacock scare the men?"

Fizar Khan gulped and looked fearfully up at the frowning, mysterious precipices as he answered. "It is a black thing from Persia's past. For nearly a thousand years, the shadow of Hasan Sabah's dreadful band has lain over these wild regions."

Mark Stanton dimly remembered half-forgotten reading. "You mean that the ancient society of the Assassins still exists?"

The Persian nodded nervously. "It has persisted since it was founded nearly ten centuries ago by Hasan Sabah, the most dreaded master of black magic Asia has ever known. The word 'assassin' itself originated from his name.

"Hasan Sabah founded a terrible society of murder! His guarded stronghold of Alamut was somewhere in these northern mountains. Legend says that it was an impenetrable castle-cyrie in a valley high in

these peaks—a valley lovely as the gardens of paradise.

"In that paradise, Hasan gathered fanatic followers whom he sent forth to slay all who crossed his will. He struck down kings, Crusaders, great khans, at his will. For he had somehow the magic power of rendering his followers utterly obedient to his will, of making them mere mindless tools of murder. That's why he, the master of the Assassins, was so dreaded."

"But surely that all died out long ago, man!" protested Angus McLachlan.

FUZAR shook his head emphatically. "The Assassins' secret empire has never died out. Their hidden valley Alamut is still a stronghold of mystery and murder. Indeed, there are those who say that the original Hasan Sabah himself still rules the order, somehow living on and on."

"Nonsense!" declared young Bradley incredulously. "It's more likely that Nazi spies put this thing here, to scare the workers and keep the railway out of commission."

"See, there are tracks of horses leading from and back into the mountains. If I could trail them—"

"Allah forbid!" Fizar exclaimed. "No man dares trail the emissaries of the dreaded order."

Bradley stepped forward and contemptuously freed the black peacock, and kicked the screeching bird away. Instantly a yell of renewed terror came from the Persian laborers.

"The Feringhi has violated the warning of the Assassins!" cried one of them horrified. "Now all of us are marked for doom!"

They scrambled forward again, mad with superstitious fear and determined to bolt out of the narrow pass back to the camp.

Stanton's automatic jumped into his hand and barked curtly. The lead slugs whistling over the heads of the panicky

workers abruptly brought them to a halt again.

"Are you children to be frightened by a bird?" Stanton asked them loudly in Persian. "It cannot harm you—but I can and I will unless you get back to work."

The Persians were caught between two fears. Their fear of the hard-faced American's gun proved strongest.

Sullenly, they picked up their discarded tools and began to work slowly upon the removal of the mass of rock. But they cast frightened glances up at the looming mountains as they labored.

Stanton strode grimly among them, his presence and the gun at his belt emphasizing his commands. His voice snapped orders that sent the work into a somehow faster tempo. In a short time, the narrow pass was ringing with the clink of picks and spades.

The rattle of a horse's hoofs made him turn sharply. He glimpsed Billy Bradley's pony disappearing up the transverse gorge that led westward into the mountains.

"What the devil—where has Bradley gone?" Stanton demanded. "Just when I need him—"

"He thought he'd trail the scuts who put that peacock here," answered Angus McLachlan.

"He is crazy," swore Fizar Khan, sweating. "He'll never come back if he should happen to overtake the emissaries of Alamut."

"That fool kid!" exclaimed Stanton angrily. "He would go off on a wild-goose chase without orders. I'll dress him down plenty for it when he gets back."

But Bradley did not return all through that day. The work in the pass went forward hour after hour, and the Persian workers seemed to have recovered a little from their superstitious terror during the day.

Night pressed down black and solid as Stanton called a halt to the labor. The Per-

sians gladly hastened back out of the gloomy pass to the camp of tents farther south along the railway. Their cooking fires soon ringed the camp, lighting the white tents redly with their shaking rays. Stanton heard chanting and the thump of a drum as he came out of his own tent later.

"They're chanting the *Daevasta*—the spell against evil," murmured Fizar Khan. "Night has brought back all their fears."

Stanton paid little attention. His eyes vainly searched the starlit vista of distant peaks for a moving figure.

"Why the devil doesn't Bradley get back? Do you suppose he's lost up there?"

"He will never come back if he has overtaken the emissaries of the Assassins." Fizar Khan's voice was heavy with foreboding.

"I'm thinking," drawled big McLachlan, "that it's more likely there are Nazi agents up in yon hills than your bogey Assassins."

"Mac's right," bit out Stanton. "There were plenty of Hitler's agents here in Iran before the Allies occupied it. They'd be smart enough to play on native superstitions to keep this railway blocked. By Heaven, I believe now that that landslide that blocked it was no accident, but—"

A shrill cry cut him off. It came from the nearby camp of the Persian workers.

A MAN was riding through the camp. Stanton saw with a feeling of sharp relief that it was Billy Bradley.

Then, as the youngster came into their circle of firelight and dismounted, Stanton stiffened. Bradley was—changed. His cleancut young face was now a stiff white mask, empty of all expression. His eyes looked sunken and glazed, and he approached them in a clumsy, jerky stride.

"What the devil—have you been drinking?" Stanton demanded of the young engineer. "If you've gone off and got swacked, now of all times—"

Fizar's sharp cry interrupted. The Per-

sian's eyes were bulging. "It is the magic of the Assassins! Look at his eyes!"

Things incredible happened with stupefying swiftness. Bradley suddenly jerked out his belt pistol. It coughed viciously, and Stanton heard the first slug whistle past him and heard a choking cry from McLachlan. A second shot followed the first.

He couldn't believe his own eyes. This couldn't be happening. Billy Bradley, coming back from the hills like a dead-faced ghost of his former self, and trying to *kill* them!

II

THE instinct of self-preservation can order the body into action while the brain is too stunned to issue commands. That happened so with Stanton now.

He was plunging forward a second after Bradley fired the first time. The flame of the second shot was close against his side as he lunged inside Bradley's guard and knocked the youngster to the ground.

Bradley struggled like a fiend, flailing with the gun. His glazed eyes glared with a soulless fury into Stanton's face, in the moonlight. Yet he fought in utter silence.

"Allah, he is an Assassin himself now!" Fizar was screeching. "Look at his face!"

Stanton's hair bristled with the horror of this struggle with a mindless human thing that only a few hours before had been his friend.

Revulsion lent strength to his blows. He got hold of the gun-hand of this clawing thing that had been Billy Bradley. His right hand came up in a jolting uppercut.

Bradley's chin snapped back. The youngster dropped the gun and sprawled, half-dazed. Instantly, Stanton was on him.

"Bring me a rope!" he yelled. "He's out of his head—we'll have to tie him up."

Fizar brought a tent-cord. The Persian workers were gathering in a babbling throng around the scene, but none of them would come near.

Stanton got the young engineer's hands and feet bound before he regained full consciousness. As Bradley came out of the daze, his foaming, raging fury was that of a trapped leopard. He strained against his bonds, seeking with mindless fury to get at them.

Stanton felt sick at the sight. He heard the hoarse, shaken cry of Fizar.

"He is an Assassin, now—he is one of the soulless killers! They stole his soul, up there in the mountains, and sent him back down here to kill."

"The sign of the peacock warned of Hasan's wrath!" screeched a Persian in the terrified throng.

Again, the superstitious Persian laborers wavered on the brink of complete flight. Again, Stanton's voice lashed at them.

"Go back to your tents! There is nothing of the Assassins in this. Bradley Khan is delirious from an accident—that is all."

But he didn't believe it himself, any more than did the terrified Persians who streamed away toward their campfires. He knew that something deep and awful had happened up in the mountains to Bradley—something that had transformed him into an only semi-human thing.

He ignored the foaming, raging thing while he bent over Angus McLachlan. The Scotchman had taken the first bullet in his shoulder and was lying, holding his hand against the wound, his craggy face pale with pain.

"I'll be all right, if you'll help me into the tent," he murmured.

Stanton did so, and when McLachlan was stretched on one of the cots, he bound and sterilized the wound.

Then he dragged in the threshing form of Bradley and put him on the other cot. In the light of the gasoline lantern, Bradley's waxy face was a rigid mask as his hollow eyes burned up at his superior.

He spoke to Bradley, shook him, shouted in his ear. It had no effect. The young-

ster only continued to struggle against his bonds.

"I feared this," Fizar babbled. "The hand of the Assassins has reached toward us. They stole the soul of Bradley Khan and then—"

"Will you stop this talk of soul-stealing?" rasped Stanton. "That's all moonshine. Something happened to him up there in the mountains, some accident."

Yet a deep inner horror made his scalp crawl, as he spoke. Something dark and dreadful had befallen the young engineer up in those mystery-guarded peaks. Some uncanny metamorphosis that had lifted young Bradley's personality from his body.

Could it be true that a centuries-old brotherhood of evil still nested in this little-known recess of ancient Asia? Were there black powers of a science far different from modern material science, yet as potent in its own way?

STANTON shook off the creeping chill that encompassed him, and bent over Bradley. "Billy, come out of it! It's Mark talking—*Mark!*"

Bradley gave no sign of recognition. His sunken, glazed eyes glared up in that hollow, dreadful stare. He writhed wildly on the cot.

"He is under the spell of the Master of Assassins," muttered Fizar. "His mind has only one idea—to complete the mission on which he was sent, and then return to Alamut."

Night was passing. Stanton strode out to rouse the workers for the day. He stopped in the misty dawn, his haggard face tightening.

The Persians were gone. Their tents and ponies had vanished, and the only sign of them was the still smoking ashes of dying campfires.

"The damned deserters!" raged Stanton. "If I'd known that they were sneaking away—"

"You could not have stopped them," said Fizar fatalistically. "They saw Bradley Khan go into the mountains, and they saw him come back—a soulless Assassin. Nobody could have prevented their flight, then."

"They've got to come back!" Stanton exclaimed. "Do you realize that six trains loaded with tanks and planes are waiting down in Tehran for this block to be cleared. Those trains can mean victory or defeat for the Russians. They *must* go through—"

He abruptly checked himself. Talking was not going to do any good. He was left alone here now, with a wounded man, a crazed youngster, and a superstition-ridden Persian. It was up to him to *do* something.

Stanton strode back into the tent. McLachlan was getting up painfully from his cot.

"Mac, could you take the gasoline-car back down the line to Tehran, by yourself?" Stanton asked the Scotchman.

McLachlan nodded. "Aye, my shoulder's none so bad. But I don't want to leave you in the lurch, lad."

"You've got to. I want you to tell HQ down in Tehran that our workers have deserted and that we'll need a full new crew at once."

McLachlan's face lengthened. "I'll do that. But I fear 'twill be little use. Ye know how news spreads in this devil-ridden land. When the natives hear the Assassins are at work here, will any of them come?"

"I'm going to take care of this Assassin business, while you're gone," Stanton bit out. "I think the whole thing is the work of a few Nazi agents up in those mountains. And I'm going to get them!"

McLachlan made further objections. But Stanton bundled the wounded Scotchman out onto the light gasoline car that would take him down the railway to Tehran in a few hours.

When it was ready to start, Stanton

turned to Fizar Khan. "You staying here, or going?"

Fizar gulped. His face was pallid underneath its olive hue, and his dread was manifest. Yet he spoke evenly, proudly.

"I think you do not know the danger of what you propose to do. Yet I stay with you."

Stanton felt contrition for his curtness. He nodded to McLachlan, and started the motor for him. The gas-car was soon out of sight, speeding south along the winding railway.

They went back into the tent. Billy Bradley was moaning now, writhing in his bonds as though tortured by inward agony. He kept straining to reach the door of the tent.

"The spell of the Master draws him back toward Alamut," whispered Fizar. "That is what has always happened—the mindless murderers who are sent forth are drawn back by irresistible compulsion."

"Nonsense," muttered Stanton. But there was no conviction in his voice now.

FOR Billy Bradley *was* straining with agonized insistence toward the door of the tent, toward the northwest. There was, in the pallid mask of the young engineer's face, a superhuman, tortured yearning such as might have lain upon the face of Lucifer looking back at the heaven from which he fell.

Stanton felt the hairs bristling on his neck. There was something hideously animal-like in the blind striving of Bradley.

"Billy, wake up!" he cried fiercely in the youngster's ear. He grabbed his shoulders and shook him. "Snap out of it!"

Bradley's sunken eyes never even flickered toward him. The young engineer still writhed blindly to reach the door of the tent.

For hours, Stanton worked over him. He used the limited resources of the medicine-chest, but none of the restoratives or seda-

tives he tried had the slightest effect upon Bradley.

"It is no use," muttered the Persian sickly. "Once a man has become an Assassin, only death can lift the spell."

Stanton ripped an oath, glaring out toward the peaks that loomed dark against the sunset. "Damn it, if somebody up there *has* deliberately done this to Billy, I'll hunt them out and pay them off for it."

Fizar shrugged hopelessly. "You'll never find them. Many times, the government at Tehran has sent soldiers into these mountains searching for the Assassins. And they have not found their stronghold."

"I'll find it!" Stanton said savagely. "Some way I'll—"

He stopped suddenly. His eyes, fixed upon the writhing Bradley, narrowed.

"By Heaven, here's our way to find Alamut or whatever other place of devils is responsible for it all!" he said. "Billy!"

Fizar stared. "I don't understand."

"Billy will guide us back there!" Mark Stanton said swiftly. "He's out of his head, obsessed somehow with the blind urge to go back to the devils who sent him down on this murder-mission. All right, we'll unbind his legs and let him go. And we'll go with him."

Fizar's dark eyes flashed panic. "Allah, no! Two men search for Alamut, with an Assassin himself for guide? It's madness!"

"We've got to go," Stanton persisted. "We'll get no workers back on this job until the superstitious menace here is cleared up and destroyed."

He swiftly inspected his pistol, then drew his knife and bent to cut the bonds around Bradley's ankles. He paused, looking up.

"I forgot, Fizar—you believe in these superstitions about the Assassins yourself. Well, I can go by myself. I won't really need you."

Fizar's high-bred face was a study in

conflicting pride and dread. And pride—pride of the most ancient blood in the world—won.

"I go with you," he said quietly. "But I think that if Bradley leads us to Alamut, we will die, or worse. What can two men do against the Assassin's devils and powers?"

"Hell, man—I'm not proposing a hare-brained attempt to mop up the whole thing by ourselves," retorted Stanton. "We'll simply find out who's behind all this superstitious sabotage. If it's Nazi agents, as I believe, and there's more than a few of them, we'll come back and lead a company of troops up there. This road has got to be cleared!"

He had cut through Bradley's ankle-bonds. The crazed youngster scrambled with wild eagerness to his feet, and lunged toward the door.

Stanton caught him, in time. Though Bradley spat and struggled, he grabbed the youngster's bound hands and hauled him back.

"Can't take a chance of him getting away," he muttered. "But it makes me sick to treat Billy like the brute animal they've made of him."

Fizar caught three horses and brought them across the deserted, sunset-lit camp. They helped Bradley clamber into the saddle of one, while the Persian held the lead-rein of that horse. He would not be able to escape.

Then, with Bradley riding between them, they trotted out of the camp toward the transverse gorge that led westward up into the mountains.

BLACK awesome peaks of mystery loomed against the blood-red sunset. Through gaps between them could be glimpsed still higher and farther crags of the mighty Elburz Range, shouldering skyward like vague ghost-mountains in the distance.

Their horses' hoofs rang on stones in the floor of the dry gorge. The way slanted steeply upward, twisting and turning but always climbing.

Bradley's horse led, guided by the knee-pressure of the bound, crazed youngster. In the dying light, Bradley's face was still a hollow mask lit only by a twitching, consuming eagerness to move on.

"Like a drug-slave, trying to get back to his dope," muttered Stanton. "What in the world was done to him?"

"It is the Master's spell, that drags him back to Alamut," reiterated Fizar somberly. "It is always so, with the Assassins."

"Will you forget that Assassin legend?" demanded Stanton. "He tried to kill us, yes—but because he was out of his head. He's not trying to get at us now."

"He is taking us back to Alamut," murmured the Persian. "To death. He does not need to kill us himself."

STANTON snorted, but made no further answer. Their ponies were laboring now, climbing a steep trail that led along the side of a ledge so narrow that they had to ride in single file.

The bloody sunset faded to a gray twilight that swiftly darkened. A little wind began to moan down from the peaks. There burgeoned forth the burning cressets of the Persian stars.

Stanton felt the chill and thinness of the air. They were already several thousand feet up from the lowland level of the railway, and still climbing. Bradley led up through the darkness with strange sureness.

"How can he know the way so certainly?" Stanton wondered. "It's as though there *is* something drawing him back."

Stanton did not credit Fizar's superstitious beliefs, but he did believe that there was trouble in case-lots somewhere up in these wild peaks.

It would be a tremendous coup for Nazi agents, if they were able to utilize native

superstitions as a lever with which to close the Trans-Iranian Railway. Germany would risk a lot to cut that vital supply-line to the Soviets. There was some hell's-nest of espionage up ahead, he felt sure.

Bradley had found it. And they had caught Bradley. They had done something to him—doped him, maybe. Whatever they had done, it had been enough to transform a fun-loving American youngster into the hollow-eyed, mindless creature who was feverishly leading them on.

Stanton swore to himself. "I owe them for that, whoever they are. If they've wrecked Billy's mind permanently—"

It was increasingly colder. They were much higher in the peaks, threading upward through labyrinthine gorges and canyons. Hours passed, and Stanton began to tire. Fizar drooped in his saddle, gasping the thin air. But Bradley still pressed on with that unhuman eagerness.

"No wonder your soldiers never found anything in here," muttered Stanton to the Persian. "What beats me is how Billy managed to find whoever he did find."

"I think that they found *him*," answered Fizar. His face was gray in the starlight.

They had entered a canyon that was only a few yards wide. A mere vertical crack high in the rock mass of the range. The tired ponies splashed a tiny stream at its bottom as they plodded through the darkness.

Suddenly Billy Bradley raised his pallid face and uttered a weird, harsh, discordant cry. It echoed eerily between the canyon walls.

"What the devil!" exclaimed Stanton startledly. "That cry—"

"The scream of a peacock!" Fizar shouted. "A signal!"

Stanton's gun was already in his hand. But he had small chance to use it.

From the darkness about them dropped black figures who smacked them off their ponies. His breath was knocked from him

as he hit the ground, and men's bodies piled fiercely on him.

Stanton realized that these men had not merely rained from the darkness. They were sentries posted on ledges along the canyon, and they had answered Bradley's weird cry by this instant attack.

Struggling beneath his attackers, he got his finger on the trigger of his pistol. The gun roared muffledly, and he felt one of the men atop him jerk backward from the smack of the slug.

BUT no cry of pain came from that man! He continued to attack with mindless ferocity, though with steadily weakening grip.

"Allah!" came a choking cry from Fizar, off in the tumultuous darkness. "The Assassins—"

These men, whoever they were, weren't human! That was the hideous realization that overtook Mark Stanton as he fought. Human men would not take a pistol slug without even wincing!

He had no chance to fire another shot. The mass of his attackers pinned him down, and the gun was wrenched from his grasp. He felt his hands being expertly bound.

Not one word had been spoken by their attackers. The uncanny silence was the final element of horror. It was as though tangible ghosts had taken them. And then as he was jerked to his feet, he saw the dark figures of their captors more clearly. Some of these men were Persians, but there were Arabs, Syrians and Turks also. All wore native costume and all had the same hollow eyes and masklike faces as Bradley.

"The Sons of Murder," Fizar was choking. He was similarly bound, bleeding from a forehead wound, his face ghastly. "We let Bradley lead us right into their hands. I knew it would be so."

"Doped, all of them," panted Stanton. "Look at their faces. These men haven't any minds."

Mindless men! Truly they seemed so, these hollow-eyed creatures. They hauled Stanton and the Persian back up onto their ponies, binding the captives' ankles to their stirrups.

Bradley had joined them, and was one of them in every respect. Now the tall, dark Arab who seemed leader of the band spoke in a thick, mumbling voice.

"To Alamut!"

They started forward, riding up the narrow canyon and leading with them the horses upon which sat Stanton and Fizar Khan.

"You heard?" choked Fizar to his fellow-captive. "Alamut! The ancient stronghold of Hasan Sabah, the valley of the Assassins."

"I still can't believe it," muttered Stanton, his thoughts whirling. "The order of the Assassins can't have persisted for all these centuries. It's only a hideous legend—"

A legend that was coming true before his eyes! He had to admit it, even though his Twentieth Century intelligence refused possibility to such things.

For these stony-faced, zombie-like captors of theirs were in every respect like the Assassins of dread story who centuries before had cast a shadow of fear over all Asia and Europe. Men immune to fear or pain, men who committed any crime that their Master ordered, so that they could return to the hidden paradise of Alamut which he ruled.

These men were riding back toward their mysterious stronghold with a twitching eagerness in their hollow eyes. A weird avidity that seemed to draw them like a magnet.

"The spell of Hasan Sabah," Fizar was saying hoarsely. "It draws them back, as always. See it in their faces."

"Hasan Sabah died centuries ago," Stanton retorted. "There's no such things as spells—"

His voice trailed off. His eyes had rested upon one of the Assassins riding beside them in the narrow canyon.

The man was a Persian, a scrawny, sal-low little man with that wax-stiff face and sunken eyes. He had a bullet-hole in his side, and blood was seeping from it.

It was the man who had taken Stanton's slug during that struggle in the canyon. That wound was mortal, Stanton knew. The man must be literally dying as he rode.

Yet he showed no sign of feeling pain or exhaustion! He rode forward as stiffly, as stonily, as the others.

A dying man, riding with these other dead-faced men toward the mysterious citadel of their dreaded order!

III

THE moon was rising. They had climbed steadily through a branching labyrinth of gorges, and the air had the thinness and coldness of extreme altitudes. Stanton's head spun from dizziness, and the air he gulped into his lungs seemed without oxygen.

He guessed they must be almost fifteen thousand feet up in the wild, high reaches of the mysterious Elburz. Then one of his captors pointed stiffly ahead, with a gesture of extreme eagerness.

His mumbling voice spoke a word. "Alamut!"

"Allah—look at it!" gasped Fizar.

Stanton was staring, as his pony jolted forward. They had entered a narrow chasm walled by high, vertical rock cliffs.

Up ahead of them, the chasm was blocked by a massive castle of black stone. It filled the narrow chasm from wall to wall, presenting a high, frowning face whose only openings were narrow loopholes and a massive bronze door. Its towers soared a hundred feet into the moonlight.

Stanton inspected it, stunned. This mas-

sive citadel looked ancient beyond belief. Like a monstrous survival of dead ages bulked its massive, crenellated walls and towers and keeps.

He saw men on guard in the embrasures of the walls, men who were watching them come up the steep chasm. He thought he glimpsed the muzzles of guns. Stanton realized the supreme impregnability of this spot. Ten men could hold it against an army.

"The citadel of Hasan," Fizar was babbling. "It is as legend tells of it. From this spot, for centuries, the Assassins have gone forth on missions of murder for their Master."

"This is just an old medieval stronghold of some kind," Stanton said through dry lips. "There's nothing strange about finding such a relic here in the wilds."

But he couldn't believe that, himself. Nothing strange? This place was the quintessence of forbidding strangeness. It brooded here in the moonlight like an ancient spider waiting for prey.

Bradley and their other captors were spurring eagerly up the steep trail toward the citadel. The unholy, twitching eagerness was stronger in the faces of the Assassins.

The massive bronze door slowly opened, as they approached. It was very high, and their little troop rode right through the opening.

The hooves of the ponies clattered on cobbled paving. Stanton heard the door grinding inexorably shut behind them.

"Dismount," said the Arab leader hol-lowly, in the Persian.

Their feet were untied from the stirrups, and they slid off the saddles. Wonderingly, Stanton looked around.

A vaulted passage of great height, in which they stood, ran right through the citadel like a tunnel. Its other end was open, and opened into the chasm beyond the castle.

They looked into the moonlit valley as green and beautiful as the legends of paradise! The chasm widened beyond the castle. Its thousand-foot cliffs were a quarter-mile apart, and extended for a mile to a point where the valley ended in a blind wall. Thus, this valley was really a blind pocket at the end of the chasm, sealed by the guarding castle.

Tall, nodding trees waved in the moonlight, above the silvered expanse of smooth lawns. Banks of flowers were massed everywhere, their fragrance drifting on the soft breeze. From the shadows came the exquisite songs of the bulbuls, the Persian nightingales. Such hushed peace and beauty was in that valley that Stanton stared, like a man rapt.

"The valley of the Assassins," Fizar was whispering. "The valley that is heaven—and hell—on earth!"

Bradley and most of the others of their captors were hastily moving through the passage. With hoarse shouts, as of men who return to paradise after exile, they hurried into that moonlit valley.

Stanton glimpsed other men in those silvered gardens, and girls or women also. But before he could see more, he and Fizar were roughly jerked into a doorway, and along a stone corridor of the castle.

"They're taking us to the Master—to Hasan himself," Fizar almost whimpered.

"Snap out of it, man!" muttered Stanton. "You're beaten before you start if you let superstition get you down."

But his own skepticism was badly shaken by what he had already seen. This place, so far, *did* exactly fit the centuries-old legends of the Assassins. That paradisaical valley, and this grim, ancient citadel that guarded it—they were all as Marco Polo had described them, centuries ago.

It had existed then, the society of magic and murder. Could it have secretly continued to exist in these remote wilds, ever since?

"Hell, no," Stanton told himself fiercely. "It must be a Nazi trick—only the Germans would be trying to cut the Russian supply-line."

THE corridors and halls through which they were being taken were shadowy and cold, illuminated by swinging silver lamps.

At every portal stood hollow-eyed men with that chilling look of blankness on their faces. There were Europeans among them, as well as men of every race in Asia. All had guns, and long daggers, in their belts.

And these shadowy corridors of the brooding castle were also alive with—peacocks! The brilliant birds strolled to and fro, as though by right, uttering their harsh, discordant screams that echoed eerily through the stone halls.

Stanton began to remember, now. The peacock was the emblem of the devil, to most races of the Middle East. And it had also been the emblem of the Assassins, in the days of their invisible empire.

Then all this was torn from his mind as he and Fizar were led into a central hall of the castle, a vast stone chamber with vaulted roof.

Silver, incense-smoking lamps cast a soft glow in this great room, and two braziers burned with leaping red flames at its farther end. There, in a carven black chair upon a low, raised step of stone, a man sat watching them from amid a small crowd of silent guards and women.

"It is he," breathed Fizar Khan. "Hasan Sabah!"

But Stanton, staring ahead as they were taken forward, spoke with sharp relief.

"Forget that stuff. This is nothing but an old man."

He had been half expecting to meet, in the leader of these weird mindless men, a personage even more fearsome than they.

But this man who sat huddled in the low

chair, this Master of mysterious Alamut, was only a little, withered old man.

He was wrapped in a robe of heavy black silk worked with silver peacock-designs, that swathed his scrawny body to the chin. Only his claw-like hands and head were uncovered. His scant, graying hair was bare, and from a wizened, leathery brown face, two strangely luminous eyes inspected them. And, as the two prisoners were halted, the man laughed shrilly.

He spoke to Stanton. "Yes, you are right. I am an old man. Out there in the world, they used to call me the Old Man of the Mountain."

"The Old Man of the Mountain?" said Stanton, startledly. "Why, that's what Marco Polo called—"

He checked himself. And the withered oldster chuckled dryly.

"Yes, I remember Polo. He passed through this region late in the 14th century. A curiosity-seeking Venetian youngster, who came prying up into these mountains. I let him go on—he was of no use to us."

Stanton's jaw dropped. He stared at the wrinkled, bland face. "What the devil! Are you trying to tell me that—"

"That I was living six hundred years ago?" finished the other smoothly. "You find that incredible?"

Fizar's hoarse whisper came to Stanton. "I told you it was so. Hasan Sabah does not die—any more than Malik Taus, the devil, himself."

"Your companion, at least, does not doubt," purred Hasan Sabah. "But you Westerners have a neat scheme of theories, and you reject any fact which will not fit into it."

"Talk," rasped Stanton, "will never make me believe that you actually spoke with Marco Polo."

Hasan's withered face creased in a smile. "Why, man, I have spoken with more than Polo! For nearly a thousand years, the great

ones of earth have passed in review before me. Many of them have been face to face with me—and many more have feared me.

"Omar Khayyam, the poet, was my schoolmate. The Crusaders who came blundering too close to this land knew me, to their cost—it was my servants who went forth and slew Conrad of Montferrat and others of them, and wrecked their enterprise. I knew Genghis Khan—a squat, burly Mongol who sent an army to destroy Alamut, but who later himself died under the daggers of my men.

"Tammerlane knew better—he let us alone. The Moguls of India later tried to root us out, but Akbar died for that, and after him, Jahangir. Napoleon, when he came invading the Middle East, at first refused my warning, but soon thought better of it when I'd showed my power. He was a cunning man, that little Corsican."

MARK STANTON struggled against a mounting feeling of belief. The mad impossibility of this old man's words was tempered by the unreal atmosphere of the place in which he stood.

The lofty, shadowy hall, the strutting, screeching peacocks, the hollow-eyed, zombie-like men and girls who stood silently, furnished a background that perfectly matched the fantastic assertions of this wizened, evil little spider of a man.

Stanton's mind clung desperately to realities, to the purpose which had brought him into this trap.

"Then it's your followers who have been blocking the Trans-Iranian rail line?" he challenged.

Hasan Sabah nodded negligently. "Of course. It is to my interest that that line be blocked, and that Russia shall fall."

Stanton's eyes narrowed. "I see. You're working for Germany—"

The old man laughed thinly. "Working for Germany? Why, your western nations and their wars mean nothing to me. I de-

sire the Russian power to collapse because that will mean the rebirth of my *own* empire."

His somber eyes glowed. "Long ago, I held all Middle Asia in the palm of my hand. My reign was invisible, but deadly. The petty chiefs and rulers of the little kingdoms knew well that unless my orders were obeyed, my emissaries would visit them with death. And they obeyed! But in the last century, the establishment of the Western powers in this part of the world has slowly shriveled my dominance.

"But when Russia falls, when the whole of Middle Asia becomes a lawless chaos once more, then it will be possible for my Assassins to re-establish my sway on a greater scale than ever. Britain and Russia have held the peace here, but with them beaten, the peace dissolves into a seething caldron of warring tribes and races which I shall soon dominate. *That* is why your supply-line must be destroyed!"

Stanton felt stunned. The vast, sinister plan was so perfectly possible of execution.

If Britain and Russia and their allies lost their grip on the Middle East, the whole region would become a vacuum into which would rush the winds of chaos. And the one purposeful, centralized power in the region would be these dreaded Assassins—

"Allah, he can do it," muttered Fizar Khan thickly. "He has the cunning of a thousand years."

Stanton shook off the crushing apprehension. "What is all this but windy talk by a crazed old man huddling in a crumbling pile of stone in the mountains?" he spat.

HASAN SABAH'S luminous eyes narrowed slightly. "You deem me crazed because I speak of having lived for all these centuries?"

"You've lived no more than sixty years, judging from your appearance," Stanton answered harshly.

To his amazement, the old man nodded. "Yes, it is true that this body of mine is some sixty years old. But this is not the *only* body I have had, American. My mind has inhabited many bodies, in the past centuries—one after another."

There was something so hideous in the calm assertion, that Stanton felt a chill not of the shadowy room.

"Can the mind leave the body?" he scoffed. "Can it pass from one body to another, like a tenant to a new house?"

"It can, with certain aid," Hasan Sabah said calmly. "Your Western science has not delved far into the science of the mind. Only for the last few decades have you had such a science at all. But we in the East have studied it for thousands of years, to the exclusion of all other sciences."

A secret smile dawned in Hasan's hooded eyes, and played around the corners of his withered lips.

"You shall learn much more of these things in a few moments. But first, it is necessary that your companion should become one of my loyal servants."

Fizar Khan shrank back, his face ghastly at these words. But the Assassin guards behind them had gripped them both.

Hasan made a gesture with his claw-like hand, as he rose to his feet. Instantly, at the old man's command, two Assassins went into a recess of the shadowy hall and pushed out from it a big, curious object.

It was a wheel of silver, mounted vertically upon an upright frame of the same metal. The wheel was like a flat disc seven feet in diameter, and upon its face was a pattern of inset, glittering diamonds.

Mark Stanton gasped. The blazing diamonds of that pattern were incalculable in value. But that was not the greatest wonder. It was the pattern itself—a strange design of interlacing loops and spirals which seemed the product of some crazy, unearthly geometry.

His eyes could not seem to follow the

interlacing complexities of those jeweled curves. Staring, he felt his senses reeling from the effort, as though he were falling into an abyss.

With an effort, Stanton tore his gaze from the hypnotic thing. And he heard the shrill, amused laugh of Hasan Sabah.

"You cannot look at the Wheel of Power?" mocked the aged Master of the Assassins. "Perhaps now you begin to believe that there are sciences of the mind which your Western peoples have not dreamed of?"

Stanton was shaken. If Hasan Sabah was the master of a psychic science unknown to the outer world—

Fizar Khan was being dragged toward the looming wheel. The Persian was thrust into a chair facing the jeweled disk, and his head was tied stiffly back so that his dilated eyes must stare straight at the wheel.

"Stanton, they seek to steal my mind!" wailed the terrified man. "They will make me one of them—"

"Don't let them fool you, Fizar!" Stanton shouted. "This is all just flummery designed to influence you by power of suggestion. Don't give in to it."

FIZAR did not seem to hear him. The jeweled wheel had begun to revolve, and the Persian was staring at it like a fascinated rabbit.

Stanton had been pulled back a little by his guards. He could not see the face of the wheel. But he could see the awful change that came over the Persian's face.

Fizar's olive countenance became rapt, strange, his eyes seeming to bulge from his head as he stared fixedly at the spinning wheel. Into his eyes came slowly that hollow, glazed look of the Assassins.

Hasan Sabah, watching from his chair like a wizened spider, spoke softly to the Persian.

"I am the Master," said Hasan. "I am Malik Taus, the lord of heaven and hell."

"You are the lord of heaven and hell," answered Fizar tonelessly.

"Heaven lies in the valley here," Hasan continued, and Stanton saw the eagerness that leaped into the Persian's hollow eyes. "And heaven and all its joys of wine and woman shall be yours, so long as you obey me."

"I will obey!" cried Fizar, with that stiff, dreadful eagerness.

"Fizar! For God's sake!" yelled Mark Stanton.

THE Persian did not seem to hear him. He never took his gaze from the diamond wheel, which now was ceasing to spin as Hasan Sabah touched some hidden control.

"It is well," Hasan said, as the wheel stopped. "I shall soon have need of you. Now stand back."

Fizar's bonds were untied. The Persian rose from the chair. And he stepped back, with the other Assassins. He did not even look at Stanton.

But Hasan Sabah was looking at Stanton's white face. And there was amusement in the old man's eyes.

"Do you believe now that the mind can be drawn forth from the body?" he asked Stanton mockingly.

Stanton forced denial to his lips. "No, I don't believe it! It's some devil's trick of hypnotism."

"You'll soon learn differently," promised Hasan Sabah. "I am going to draw your mind forth, Stanton. And I shall take its place."

The American stared. He husked, "What are you trying to tell me? That you can exchange minds with me — exchange bodies—"

"How else," asked Hasan meaningly, "do you think that I have lived for all these centuries? Aye, that is the means I use. When my body grows old and worn-out, I simply transfer myself from it to another

and stronger, younger body. The mind is a web of immaterial force which can reside in one physical brain as well as in another."

His dark eyes speculatively surveyed Stanton's rigid form. "Yours will last me for many years, I think. And I have a special reason for wanting your body. That is why I sent your friend Bradley, my servant, to kill your friends but to *capture* you and bring you here. You see, Stanton, in your body I can go down there and make quite sure that the Russian supply-route is cut and that my great plans are realized."

Stanton felt as though he were caught in a weird nightmare. This chill, shadowy hall of strutting peacocks and dead-faced men, it must all be as unreal as the statement the other had just made.

An exchange of minds between two bodies? It wasn't possible! All the tenets of known science refused possibility to such a phenomenon. All known science—yet there might be unknown science that could achieve it—

Hasan Sabah was uttering an order to the huge Kurd who was the captain of the guards. "Summon all my servants. They must witness the transformation so that all will henceforth recognize their Master's new body."

A gong clangored, booming out through the castle. Meanwhile, Stanton was being forced down into the chair that faced the diamond wheel.

Into the great hall came streaming the tenants of the valley. The Assassins! Scores of them, crowding silently into the big room.

Fighting-men of a dozen different races of East and West, stalwart, young, fully armed. And girls of half the East, slim and lovely, Chinese maids as yellow as gold, catlike Turkish girls, pale Circassian maidens.

And all of them—dead-alive! All of them moving stiffly and silently as walking

corpses, with that same rigidity of face and hollowness of eye that now marked Billy Bradley and Fizar. Assassins—mindless tools of the lord of murder who had made them what they were!

Hasan Sabah's shrill voice rang authoritatively to the silent, dead-faced throng. "This day, my servants, I take for myself a new body. Henceforth I dwell in the body of this man. Hear ye?"

He was pointing to the numb, staring Stanton. And there came from the dead-faced throng a low, mumbled chorus of answer.

"We hear, Master."

"Henceforth," Hasan declared, "you shall obey me as before, but my commands will come from this man's lips, for I shall be he?"

"We will obey, Master," came the slow, heavy response.

"It is well," said Hasan. "Now watch while your Master casts away this outworn body and takes new form and life."

His chair had been brought beside Stanton's so that both faced the cryptic Wheel of Power. The jeweled disk began to spin. Stanton tried not to look at it, but the giant Kurd behind him forced his head back so that his opened eyes must stare at the whirling surface.

THE blazing diamond pattern seemed to uncoil as the wheel spun faster. Stanton again had that sense of reeling into an abyss as the hypnotic twirl of extra-geometrical curves dragged at his brain. He fought wildly against the overpowering sensation.

"Not magic—science!" he thought wildly as he struggled. "The super-advanced psychic science of a forgotten race—"

The mind was a tenuous network of electric force. It could easily be pulled free of its physical body—hypnotism such as that of the spinning wheel could do that.

But if *two* minds were drawn from their bodies at the same time, and if one of them, by powerful will and knowledge, re-entered the body of the *other* when the process was reversed—

"God, it can't happen! It won't!" Stanton thought despairingly, as his consciousness trembled on the brink of darkness.

He knew nothing but a roaring blackness in which the only light was that of the wheel's blazing, whirling curves. Then presently it seemed to him that the whirl of those hypnotic lines was reversed.

Slowly, consciousness began to come back to him. He was aware again of the chair in which he sat.

A great throb of thankfulness shook him. It hadn't happened. He should have known that such an unholy thing could not happen—

A strong, resonant voice spoke beside him. "It is done!"

That voice—Stanton recognized it—it was *his own voice!*

He opened his eyes. And he uttered a strangling cry as he saw the man who had risen to his feet beside him.

That man was—himself! It was Mark Stanton's tall, stalwart young figure that stood, towering over him.

Stanton numbly looked down at his own figure. He knew what he would see. And he saw it.

His hands were the thin, clawlike hands of a very old man. They were shaking as he raised them to his face—a withered, wrinkled face that was not his own.

He cried out—and his voice was a cracked, quavering shrillness.

Hasan Sabah paid no attention. Facing the staring zombie-throng of Assassins, the man in Stanton's body spoke loudly and triumphantly.

"You have seen me take this new body, my servants. Look at me, and know me so that henceforth you may obey the *new* Hasan."

And Stanton dimly heard the throng answer. "We obey, Master!"

IV

THE crowd of Assassins filed out, shuffling back into the valley from which they had come.

Hasan Sabah nodded to his giant zombie-guards. "Yes, you may go also. I need no one to protect me from *that*."

And he gestured amusedly at Stanton, who still stood tremblingly looking down at his thin, strengthless old body.

Stanton tottered to a nearby hanging shield, peered dazedly at himself in the polished metal surface. And the wizened, withered old face that looked back at him tripped the pent-up horror in his brain.

He turned and launched himself at the tall, khaki-clad figure that had been his own until a few moments before. His hands clutched at Hasan's throat—his own throat.

But his grip was the weak, nerveless grip of an old man. Hasan flung him off and into a chair, as though he had been a child.

"Oh, but it is good to be strong and young again!" exulted the Assassin lord. The tanned face that Stanton could still only think of as his own flared with exultation. "Your body and your identity will serve me well, American."

It brought a deeper horror to Stanton's rocking mind, that reminder. Not only was he hideously trapped in this worn-out husk of a body. Hasan Sabah, in *his* body, in his identity, would be able to go down to the lowlands and effectively sabotage the Russian life-line, and cause that collapse of Allied power in the Middle East on which he would found his empire of murder.

Stanton's thoughts shook to the ghastly possibilities. He must find some way to present that, no matter what happened to

himself. The fate of the most vital of all the war fronts hung upon it. Yet—what could he do, trapped not only in Hasan's stronghold but in Hasan's cast-off body?

Hasan was surveying him relentlessly. "You have one chance to live a little longer," the Assassin chief was saying. "That body you now inhabit will last a few more years—and life is sweet, in any form. I will let you live, as one of my servants, if you help me. You know things that I must know, if I am to play your part."

So that was why Hasan Sabah had kept him here, after making the hideous exchange of bodies? That was why he had dismissed his guards from hearing? The Assassin's plan became clearer to Stanton.

And Stanton's desperate mind perceived, for the first time, a faint, glimmering possibility of thwarting the other's deadly scheme. A madly impossible stratagem, it seemed. Yet if he could do it—

He looked up shakily at the man who had robbed him of his body. "You will let me live?" he quavered. "If I tell you all you want to know?"

Hasan Sabah laughed. "So life *is* still sweet to you? I knew it would be—it always is. Yes, you can live, as one of my Assassins, if you tell me what I ask."

Stanton was wildly calculating. How long had it been since he and Fizar had come up to this lofty citadel? It seemed like eternities, but how long a period had actually passed?

Two hours? Not more than that, surely. But that wasn't enough. His desperate stratagem wouldn't work until at least two more hours had passed, if at all. That meant he must stall, play for time.

"What do you want to know?" he asked shrilly.

Hasan's reply was crisp. "I must know the exact places at which the supply line can be permanently blocked most easily. I must know also the storage places of ex-

plosives, the distances, the details of the guard."

Stanton fathomed the other's intentions. Hasan would go down there to the lowlands in *his* body and identity, would be able unchallenged to prepare deadly sabotage, and with the help of his mindless slaves would sever the Russian life-line once and for all. And then—hell would spew over all mid-Asia and the empire of the Assassins would blossom again like a poisonous flower.

Slowly, Stanton quavered forth the information the other demanded. He made Hasan drag each detail out of him by remorseless questions. He was playing for time, watching and waiting. The only hope for his wild scheme was that he could prolong this inquisition.

An hour passed thus, and part of another. It has been nearly four hours since he and Fizar had reached this place. What he was hoping for and praying for should have happened by now. But it hadn't.

Hasan Sabah suddenly detected the quality of strained watching in Stanton's trembling figure. The Master's eyes narrowed.

"So that is why you have been prolonging your answers," he spat. "You've done that deliberately—you're hoping for help to come from outside. Doubtless you left friends to get help, down below."

"No!" denied Stanton quaveringly, in sharp alarm and dismay. "It isn't so—"

Hasan Sabah laughed. "You poor fool! Even if an army came up here, it couldn't help you now. A word to my faithful servants, and anyone who comes up into these peaks will be destroyed."

He turned, raising a little hammer to strike the copper gong that summoned his guards.

Stanton felt ultimate despair. His wild scheme wasn't going to work. The slender possibility he had hoped for was denied him.

He sprang toward Hasan. He'd do his damndest to kill this devil, anyway. If he could die taking the Assassin with him—

HASAN SABAH whirled, and his powerful grasp checked Stanton's rush. The Assassin shook Stanton's frail, strengthless old body as he might have shaken a doll. He roared with laughter.

"You haven't realized yet that you're only a poor old bag of bones whom a child could overpower," Hasan laughed. "I can snap your neck with my bare hands, and now I've learned all you can tell, I will—"

Hasan stopped suddenly. Over his face—Stanton's own tanned face!—there came a sudden expression as of an agonizing spasm of pain.

He dropped Stanton and staggered back, clutching his heart. He was gasping for breath, his face suddenly livid, his lips turning blue.

"What—what is this?" he choked. "I can't breathe—my heart is bursting—"

Stanton laughed shrilly. "It's *you* who are the fool, Hasan!" he cried. "You wanted my body because you thought I was young and strong. What you didn't know was that my heart has always been bad, and that I have had one attack after another. The doctors told me that the next attack would kill me."

Hasan was gasping, tottering, his eyes wild and his face a ghastly color as he labored for breath.

"No!" he choked. "It can't be so!"

"You're going to die, Hasan!" shrilled Stanton. "You're going to die in my body, now! You didn't know it but you did me a favor when you exchanged our bodies."

The other man's eyes flashed wild rage as he heard, as he saw the bitter mockery on Stanton's face. Fighting against the attack that was overpowering him, Hasan Sabah showed his tremendous will.

"No!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "I won't die in your body, Stanton. I'll change back—there's still time—"

He lurched forward. Stanton made as though to flee, but the hands of the other gripped him. There was not enough strength in Stanton's aged form to resist, as the staggering Hasan slammed his down into one of the chairs before the Wheel of Power.

The diamond-studded wheel began revolving. Hasan, gasping and pale, exerted convulsive strength to hold Stanton's head up to the spinning hypnotic disk.

"You exulted too soon!" he snarled thickly. "Look!"

Stanton made as though to resist, but seemed unable to take his eyes from the swirling, blazing loops and coils of the disk. Again, he had that weird feeling of being drawn out of his physical body into blackness.

HE CAME back to consciousness. He was sitting in the other chair, now—and *he was in his own body again.*

Stanton looked down at himself with throbbing thankfulness. His own stalwart young body! Though his heart was pounding wildly, though his breath came gaspingly and he felt dizzy, he felt prayerful gratitude.

Hasan Sabah was rising from the other chair. Hasan, back in *his* own body, the thin, scrawny body of an old man.

Hasan's eyes flashed triumph at Stanton, staggering there. "Your trick failed!" he shrilled. He turned and struck the copper gong. "You thought I would die in your body, but I didn't—and now *you* are going to die."

"On the contrary, my trick succeeded," Stanton said hoarsely. "There's nothing the matter with my heart. I only said there was, to bluff you into re-exchanging our bodies."

"A lie!" shrilled Hasan Sabah. "I felt it

myself, in your body, a violent heart-attack that almost overpowered me. You're feeling it now."

"It's no heart-attack, though it feels like one," Stanton retorted breathlessly. "It's merely anoxaemia — mountain sickness. The sickness that makes the heart pound almost to bursting, and the breath short and gasping, when a dweller of the lowlands like myself comes suddenly into a high altitude like this.

"I knew mountain-sickness would hit my body before long," Stanton continued swiftly. "It always hits three or four hours after coming to a high altitude. I could feel the first symptoms more than an hour ago. And when it hit my body—*your* body, then—I told you it was a heart-attack and you believed it."

Hasan Sabah's wrinkled old face was livid. "You lying dog! Your trick will do you no good—I can re-effect the exchange, and still carry out my plan."

The old man whirled around, as his dead-faced Assassin guards came into the hall in answer to the gong.

He pointed his clawlike hand at Stanton. "Seize him!" he raged.

THE zombie-like Assassins did not obey. Instead, they turned their dull, hollow eyes toward Stanton.

"You summoned us, Master?" the big Kurd captain asked Stanton.

For the first time, in his rage, Hasan Sabah realized that his Assassins did not know of the re-exchange of bodies. To them, Stanton was still the Master.

"You fools, *I* am the Master!" shrilled Hasan, fear coming into his eyes. "I am Hasan Sabah!"

Then, as the dead-faced men paid him no attention, he snatched a pistol from a hidden recess and leveled it at Stanton.

Stanton had no weapon. He met that deadly, sudden attack in the only way he could.

He shouted to the guards, "Kill that man!"

And he pointed toward Hasan Sabah.

The huge Kurd leaped forward. His saber whistled in the air. The point ripped into Hasan Sabah's back and out of his breast. And the skinny, withered little old figure dropped the gun and staggered and fell sidewise.

Stanton found himself shaking violently. Hasan Sabah, the Master of the Assassins who had lived almost a thousand years, was dead.

The giant Kurd and the other Assassins looked up with their hollow eyes at Stanton.

"Now what, Master?" mumbled the man.

"Send me those called Bradley and Fizar Khan," Stanton ordered.

IT WAS not long before the guards came back with Billy Bradley and Fizar. The two men, hollow-eyed zombies like the others, stared up at Stanton without any recognition in their dead gaze.

"Fizar! Billy!" cried Stanton. "You've got to wake up!"

There was no response in their stiff, wax-like faces. Bradley spoke in reply.

"We are awake, Master," he said hollowly.

Stanton felt momentary despair. But then hope came back to him. Billy Bradley and Fizar had been reduced to this mindless state by hypnotic science. The hypnotic and psychiatric science of modern psychologists should be able to bring them back to normal.

And if that was so, these others could be brought back to normal also. All these Assassins, these pitiful men and women of the living dead, could live again, in time.

He gave his orders. "Open the castle gates, and bring horses. Summon every Assassin in the valley. We are going down to the lowlands, to the camp there."

The huge Kurd asked, "Do we go to kill, Master?"

"No," Stanton replied. "We do not go to kill, this time. Leave all your weapons behind."

While the silent Assassins were gathering outside the castle, Stanton explored its chambers. He found, as he had expected, an arsenal of weapons and munitions.

Twenty minutes later, he hurried out into the bright sunrise to the band of waiting Assassins. All of them, men and women, sat their horses in dead-faced silence.

Stanton mounted and gave his command. "We ride. You will follow me."

Back came a dull, mumbling response from many throats. "We follow, Master."

They galloped down the narrow chasm, the weird troop riding silently behind the

American. Before they had gone far, there was a booming crash from behind them.

None of the dead-eyed riders looked back, at that prolonged roar. They rode stiffly on. But Stanton looked back.

And he saw the ruins of Hasan Sabah's castle collapsing across the mouth of the blind valley. The fuse he had set in the munitions had done its work. The Valley of the Assassins was closed forever, and after a thousand years, Hasan Sabah lay entombed in the ruins of fabled Alamut.

Stanton turned and rode on. Bradley and Fizar and the others would soon be normal men again, God willing. The threat to the life-line of the democracies was gone. He felt a profound thankfulness.

And the rising sun looked down as for the last time the Assassins rode down out of the mountains behind their Master.