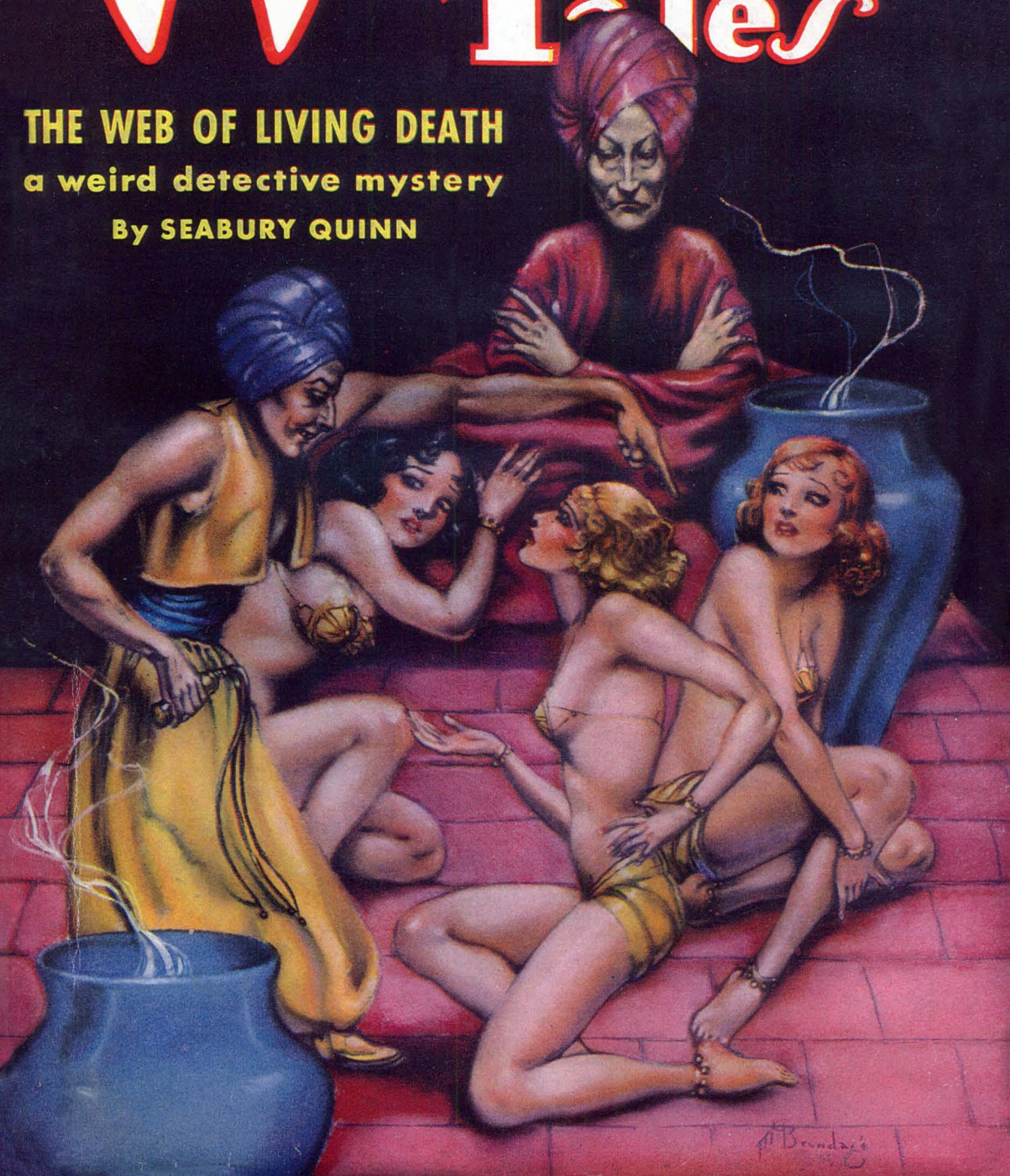


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Weird Tales

THE WEB OF LIVING DEATH
a weird detective mystery
By SEABURY QUINN



Brundage

A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL



Weird Tales

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH



"Pandemonium followed chaos."

The Web of Living Death

By SEABURY QUINN

A terror-tale of a strange house in the swamp—a weird tale of stark horror and eery happenings

"I WOULDN'T take the Shore Road tonight, sir," the filling-station attendant screwed the radiator cap in place and paused, one foot on the car step, a half-serious, half-stubborn look upon his honest, freckled face. "It's five

miles longer by the inside way, but——"

"What's the matter, paving up?" asked Merrill as he tamped an ounce of tobacco into his pipe bowl. "There's nothing in the guide to indicate——"

"No, sir, nothing's wrong with the

paving," the other admitted. "It's an all-right road to drive on in the daytime, but—well, sir, you can go that way if you want to, of course, but I wouldn't drive across them marshes after dark for sump'n pretty."

"I guess I'll take a chance," said Merrill, setting his pipe alight and shooting his self-starter. "Be seeing you."

A gibbous moon rode high in a sea of mackerel clouds, and from the marshes, slashed and crisscrossed with tidal creeks, a steadily thickening bank of low-lying, miasmatic mist marched shoreward. "H'm, maybe that young 'un knew what he was talking about, after all," Merrill murmured to himself, throttling down his engine. "It'll be thicker than pea soup in half an hour, not so good for speed—"

"Going my way, brother?" The questioner loomed beside the road amid the gathering mists, feet wide apart, thumb cocked in the familiar gesture of the hitch-hiker. A broad and most ingratiating grin was on his face.

"Er, yes, I suppose so," Merrill answered, surveying the other between narrowed lids. "Hop in."

"Thanks, I will," the young man answered laconically, clambering nimbly into the seat without troubling to open the roadster's door. Then, as Merrill put on speed: "Take it slow along here; I tried to do a Barney Oldfield half an hour ago. My puddle-jumper's mired hub-deep back there."

"Umph?" Merrill cast a sidelong, appraising glance at his companion as he eased the flow of gas. He was a very big young man, easily six feet in height, and broad proportionately. His face was deeply tanned, his blue eyes set amid a web of fine sun-wrinkles, his corduroy suit and high laced boots liberally overlaid with swamp-ooze.

"I tried to dig her out myself," he ex-

Seabury Quinn, creator of Jules de Grandin, ghost-breaker and occultist, who for years has been the most fascinating detective of modern fiction, leaves the mercurial little Frenchman for a while and introduces a new hero in this story, "The Web of Living Death." He is Thomas Garter, whose occupation it is to investigate mysterious disappearances for life insurance companies. In this weird detective mystery his powers are put to a severe test, for the utterly unusual happenings of this tale are unique in fiction or in fact. This novelette, which is published complete in this issue, will hold your eyes glued to the printed page, with its breath-taking suspense, vivid action, dangerous episodes and strange events. We recommend the story to you.

plained with a deprecating glance at his muddied clothes, "but it was no go. I'll send back a wrecking-car tomorrow morning if——" he paused reflectively, surveying the fog-shrouded scenery.

"Yes, if——" Merrill prompted sharply.

"If we ever get any place," the other answered with a cheerful grin. "This stretch of road's not exactly what you'd call a health resort and—hold hard, man; down brakes!"

Looming through the swirling mist, not fifty feet away, the headlights of another car bore down on them.

Merrill wrenched his wheel abruptly, swinging his car violently to the right; the opposing headlights swerved left and came directly at him. Instinctively he bore his foot down on the brake, stopping with a grinding squeal, and as he

halted, the headlights which confronted him abruptly disappeared, leaving him gazing up a long, deserted stretch of road, nothing visible for miles but the tall, brown grasses of the salt marshes, the ever-moving banks of fog, and the great tree which stood alone and sentinel-like beside the roadway where the other car had been.

"Well, I'll be a monkey's uncle; I sure will!" his passenger declared. "You saw it, too, didn't you?"

"Saw it? Of course I did!" Merrill answered tartly. "What——"

"Well, then, if I'm cuckoo, so are you. We'll be company for each other in the padded cell," the big young man grinned at him as he swung a leg over the side of the car.

"Where are you going?" Merrill asked, his scalp and neck still tingling with uncanny thrills.

"Just to do a little snooping. Motor cars don't jump out at you like the boggy man, then do a disappearing act, you know. Come on, want to have a look?"

"I—yes, of course," said Merrill, drawing up his knees as he wormed past the steering-wheel. "Be with you in a——"

He saw his guest stride quickly toward the tree, saw him thrust a hand beneath the skirt of his long jacket, heard his sudden shout "Look out!" then saw no more as a blight of Stygian darkness fell upon him, smothering back the startled breath that rushed into his throat, and the cloyingly sweet scent of heavy fumes assailed his nostrils.

FAR away, a hundred million miles away, it seemed, a bright star winked at Merrill. It grew and widened, like the headlight of a locomotive rushing down the track, ceased flickering, became the steady glow of a big lamp. Merrill raised himself and looked about him. He lay

upon a sort of ottoman covered with red cloth, and everywhere he looked the ruddy color was repeated. The room was big, some forty feet in length by twenty broad, its walls hung with crimson brocade, its tiled floor covered with a crimson carpet. About the walls, set shoulder-high, and reminding Merrill of a sacrilegious parody of the stations of the cross set in a church, were little niches, each some eighteen inches wide by two feet high, framed and lined with polished ebony. Each niche contained a statuette wrought in gleaming marble. Each differed from the others, yet all had one thing in common: not one revealed a face. Some countenances were hidden by long, disheveled hair, some obscured by masks or the raised beavers of mediæval helmets; one female statue wore a veil, another bowed its face into its outspread fingers as though it wept hysterically.

At the apartment's farther end was a high archway hung with scarlet curtains, and on either side of this, as though they mounted guard, were suits of Saracenic armor, each grasping a bare simitar in its right gauntlet, each with the hideous visage of a skull peering out from underneath the pointed cap of polished steel. From the ceiling hung a heavy lamp of hammered bronze, which was the light which Merrill saw when he first awakened.

"Uh-uh, ain't this sumpin?" a voice came to him from across the scarlet room.

He raised his head again and beheld his late traveling companion sitting on a couch which was the duplicate of his, his face clasped in his hands while he rocked his body slowly to and fro.

"If I hadn't seen it, I never woulda believed it," he solemnly announced, rising unsteadily to his feet and gazing round the room. "Yes, sir, this is certainly a case of seeing being believing—maybe. Take those fellers over there, for

instance." He nodded toward the skeletons in armor. "Would you believe that you could see such things as that and still be sober? I——"

"What happened?" Merrill interjected.

"Your guess is as good as mine, maybe better. I'd just got down to take a little look-see when I thought I saw a feller climbing over the back of your car and yelled to you to duck. That's what comes of altruism. If I'd been 'tending to my own knitting they wouldn't have pulled the well-known bag over my head; not without a struggle, anyway. Next thing I knew"—he waved a big, well-cared-for hand in an all-embracing gesture—"here we are."

"So I see," conceded Merrill tartly. "The next question is how are we to get out. I'll be hanged if I stay here one more minute——"

"Then you will certainly be hanged, I fear," a voice as soft as the purring of a cat—or the hissing of a snake—cut in, and as Merrill and his erstwhile passenger spun round they saw that a section of the scarlet wall had folded back, revealing a blind doorway in which a man was standing.

He was in evening dress, the immaculate linen and prim black broadcloth of his costume contrasting oddly with the turban of red silk which swathed his head. He might have been a Jew, perhaps an Armenian or Turk, for his face was dark, his features large and somewhat heavy, though not coarse, and the dark brown eyes beneath his heavy, high-arched brows were extraordinarily bright. There was a menacing, impenetrable, unfathomable expression in them as he bent his gaze upon the other two.

"Yes," he added with a low, sardonic chuckle, "if you are to be hanged for remaining longer than a minute, I fear you had better prepare your neck for the

halter, my dear sir. You may feel it any moment, for that matter. Whether you do or not depends upon your actions and your capabilities."

"Who are you?" demanded Merrill, taking a quick step forward.

"Who are you, is more to the point," the other answered, and the smile faded from his face, leaving it instinct with cruelty.

"I refuse to answer any questions," began Merrill, but before he could continue the turbaned man struck his hands together softly, and from the passage at his back there strode two giant blacks, entirely naked save for turbans and small aprons of black silk, each carrying a heavy whip of plaited rawhide, its fourfold lashes terminating in small iron hooks.

"Will you answer, or must I use persuasion?" asked the man in evening dress, and his eyes were hard as frozen pools of ink, while underneath the softness of his voice there lay a cutting-edge of menace.

"You win," answered the young man Merrill had befriended. "My name's Carter; Thomas Eldridge Carter; age, twenty-six; profession, accountant, at present unemployed; residence, New York. How I got here you know a dam' sight better than I. Anything else?"

"Do unemployed accountants usually go armed with pistols and blackjacks, Mr. Carter?" asked the turbaned man.

"They do when they're traveling through lonely parts of Long Island," answered Carter; "though for all the use I made of mine, I might as well have left the hardware home," he added with a grin.

The other ignored his pleasantry and turned a threatening glance on Merrill. "Will you answer?" he demanded sharply.

"I'm Melancthon Merrill, instructor in political philosophy at Norwood Col-

lege," answered Merrill. "My special subject is ancient and mediæval civilizations, and——"

"You are familiar with the civilization—the manners and customs—of mediæval Syria?" cut in the other.

"Yes, to some extent. I——"

"Very well; we can find a place for you, no doubt.

"As to you," he turned to Carter, "I fear that we shall find small use for you professionally. Did you engage in athletics while at college?"

"Varsity football, basketball, track team——" young Carter catalogued tersely, but:

"That will do; there will be room for you," the other interrupted.

"Zit!" the voice spoke abruptly to the black colossi, who dodged back through the open door.

THERE was a gentle, rustling sound, as of silk brushing silk, and where the door had been was only the brocaded wall. Next instant, like a dropping eyelid, the light winked out, and they felt the suffocating weight of utter darkness fall on them. A faintly hissing noise, like steam escaping from a kettle, sounded in the darkness, and the nauseatingly sweet odor of the anesthetic which had rendered him unconscious on the road came to Merrill's nostrils. "Carter, Carter, where are you?" he cried in sudden panic.

"Right here, Professor, where Moses was when the lights went out, I reckon," Carter's cheerful voice responded.

"They're gassing us. That——"

"You're telling me?" Tom Carter interrupted. "Got your handkerchief?"

"Yes," Professor Merrill fumbled at his jacket pocket, dragging out the linen square.

"Good enough. Tie it round your

mouth and nose. It won't help much, but it may help a little. All fixed? All right, let's try to make a break. That doorway by the skeletons might lead us somewhere."

Slowly, making heavy-footed progress as the anesthetic dulled his senses, Merrill crossed the room, found Carter's hand and grasped it firmly, then began a stumbling walk toward the doorway, guarded by the armored liches.

"Careful, now," warned Carter as they felt the cool steel of the chain-mail and circled round the grisly guardians, "there may be some trick to this; it wouldn't do to have one of those swords come down and slice us."

Fighting hard for breath, Merrill volunteered no answer as with weakening knees he reached the archway, swept aside the scarlet curtains and felt frantically for the fastenings of the door. Only smoothly polished wood met his searching fingers, and with a sob of disappointment he swayed drunkenly, clutched the curtains for support, then felt himself grasped roughly by the elbow and dragged across the threshold. Feeling on the portal's farther side, Carter's hands had grasped a latch of hammered bronze, wrenched it savagely and unbarred the door.

"Well, I'm a baboon's cousin, I sure am!" announced Carter with conviction as they closed the door behind them and, leaning back against its polished planks, drank in deep drafts of fresh, untainted air.

"Where are we now?" asked Merrill, gulping down another lungful of revivifying air.

"Somewhere East of Suez, judging by the get-up of that Boy Scout we just talked to," Carter answered. "Come on, let's be moving. That get-away of ours was too easy; there's a catch to it some-

where, or I'm an ape's great-grandfather."

The room they stood in was considerably larger than the red-walled chamber they had quit. Its walls were marble or some sort of tile, pierced on three sides by low Moorish arches. Its floor was composed of alternating plinths of black and white, covered for the most part by a heavy carpet of black or some dark color which they were unable to determine, since the sole illumination of the vast apartment was a little lamp with shade of perforated bronze beneath which orchid glass was set, toning down the light till it was but a faint shade brighter than the darkness of the room behind them. Between the arches and against the solid wall were set what looked like couches piled with pillows shaped like giant mushrooms. Throughout the place there hovered perfume, not the sweet and cloying scent of the anesthetic they had fled, but something subtle, faint, intoxicating, like the delicately suggestive scent of ambergris.

"If this don't beat the devil," began Carter, then paused, his right hand lifted as against a blow.

Across the darkness from the great room's farther side there came a low and sobbing moan, a sound so filled with terror mixed with sorrow that it might have been the lamentation of a soul in hell.

Nodding swift command to Merrill, Carter took a quick step forward, then paused abruptly, his hand on his companion's arm. "That carpet doesn't look so good to me," he announced in an almost soundless whisper. "Too many choice places for trap-doors under it. Let's go round the long way."

Skirting the rug, treading warily on the marble pavement, lest a block give way beneath their feet, they hastened along two sides of the room, then paused to

listen a moment. The moan which told them they were not alone had not been repeated, and in the tense, unbroken silence they could almost hear the beating of each other's hearts. Then the faintest echo of a sound, the gentle rustling of a couch cover, or perhaps of a pillow being moved, led them toward the nearest archway.

CARTER fumbled through his pockets; then, with an exultant sigh: "Here's one—just one," he announced. "They surely cleaned us out, but somehow they overlooked this one." A scratching on his boot sole, and a match-flame blossomed into orange light. For a moment it glared against their eyes with the blinding brilliance of full sunlight; then as the sputtering flare grew steady as it took hold of the wood, the men fell backward simultaneously with a gasp of stark astonishment upon their lips.

A face, a woman's face, sad, beautiful and frightened, looked up at them across the match-flame. The eyes were blue, shading to violet tints, large, fringed with curling lashes, moist and weary with tears. Her chestnut hair, with deep, shadow-laden waves, was cut squarely across her forehead in front, almost level with her delicately arching brows; at the sides and back it was cropped off in a straight line which barely left her ear lobes visible. The nose was small and delicate with slender nostrils, the lips full, gently arched and rouged a brilliant red; the ivory pallor of her cheeks was enhanced by the shadow of long, silken lashes. Save for a pair of Oriental breast-plates done in silver filigree and harnessed round her shoulders with fine silver chains, broad silver slave-bracelets hung with tiny bells and a pair of bell-hung anklets, she was nude, a lovely statuette of pallid flesh and shadow

against the purple robe and pillows of the couch.

The fingers of one hand, stained brilliant red from nails to knuckles, were pressed against her mouth as though to stifle back a cry, and over them the wide, black-fringed eyes dilated in the sudden glare of match-light. The hand slid downward from her mouth and rested on her throat, as though to ease the passage of the breath which halted there.

"Wh—who are you?" she whispered thickly as the match-flame flickered and went out. Then, before the men could answer:

"What are you doing here? Have they discovered you? Oh—quick, before they find you, kill me—kill me quickly, for pity's sake!"

"Take it easy, sister," urged Tom Carter. "Who—what are you?"

"Dale Car—O God, I forgot! Zil-i-Gulab is my name. I'm a slave."

"A what? Haven't you heard of Marse Lincoln's proclamation——"

The girl broke in with frightened haste. "You've only just come here; you don't understand. I'm a slave, I tell you, a helpless, willless chattel; I have no right to speak or act, not even to think, except as I am ordered, and death by torture follows disobedience!"

"H'm, not so good," Tom Carter murmured thoughtfully. "How'd you get into this jam?"

"I was driving in from Great South Bay one night, I don't remember just how long ago—one loses count of time in here—and just as I came to a big tree by the salt marshes I saw another car coming head-on at me. I swerved to the right, and it swerved, too. I knew there'd be a crash unless I left the road, so I steered into the marsh. The car turned over in the ditch, and when I came to I was here, stripped naked, with these rings fastened

in my ears"—she raised her hand to touch the four-inch silver hoops which pierced her ear lobes—"and they told me I must stay here always and do exactly as they told me, or they'd torture me to death. They'll do it, too—I saw a girl—oh, please, if you've sisters of your own and they mean anything to you, kill me; choke me, break my neck, do anything—only kill me before——"

"S-s-sh!" she paused abruptly, finger raised to lips. "Somebody's coming. Quick, hide behind the couch. If they catch you here your lives aren't worth a puff of smoke."

Reluctantly but swiftly Merrill and Carter dropped between the couch and wall, and scarcely had they found concealment when the shuffle of soft shoes against the marble pavement told them that the girl's quick hearing had not been mistaken.

Even in the dim, uncertain light they saw the newcomer was hideous. Stooped and bent with the unmistakable deformity of a hunchback, his body was nevertheless broad and powerful, and the hands which hung down well below his knees were of extraordinary size and obviously strong as those of a gorilla. The hairy, pock-marked face, the inflamed eyelids, the fangs that gleamed from receding gums together formed a countenance repulsive as a mediæval artist's conception of the Devil. An enormous turban of blue silk was swathed about the creature's head; loose, baggy trousers of canary yellow, gathered tightly at the ankles, encased his nether limbs; upon his broad and splay-boned feet were slippers of soft leather. In one hand he bore a three-lashed whip of plaited rawhide, each lash tipped with a small bead of iron.

As the visitant came through the arch the girl sprang nimbly from her couch,

dropped to her knees, crossed her feet one above the other, then fell forward on her face, arms trailing backward beside her prostrate body, the hands lying palm-upward in sign of absolute submission.

The hunchback looked at her a moment, then stepping forward thrust a slippered foot against her face as a cruel master might spurn a cringing dog. "Art ready, creature?" he demanded in a high-pitched, cackling voice.

"Harkening and obedience, master of my breath," the girl responded meekly.

"It is well. Two more recruits have come to join the Sheik Al-Jebal's forces. We must make them welcome with our usual hospitality. Come, example of unparalleled uncouthness, and see that thou playest thy part with ardor."

He turned upon his heel and the girl rose silently and followed him, eyes cast demurely down, arms close at sides, wrists bent, hands held out sharply at right angles to her body.

"WELL, I'll adopt an orphan kangaroo!" Carter muttered as the tinkle of the girl's ankle-bells faded to an echo. "Can you imagine a snatch racket like that being pulled on the South Shore of Long Island in the Twentieth Century?"

"Carter," Merrill told him solemnly, "I think we're up against the biggest thing that's been known here since the Molly Maguires terrorized Pennsylvania. Did you hear what that hunchback told that girl?"

"H'm," Carter scratched his chin reflectively. "He told her to do her stuff, for they'd signed up two new members of the lodge—meaning you and me, I take it, and——"

"Precisely. And——"

"I don't think I quite follow you, Professor."

"Perhaps you don't; the reference might have been obscure. Did you ever hear of the Sheik Al-Jebal, the Old Man of the Mountain?"

"Why, sure. He's a character in the *Arabian Nights*, isn't he? The one Sinbad the Sailor met——"

"He certainly was not," Professor Merrill contradicted. "He was the absolute ruler of the greatest and most dreaded secret organization of the Middle Ages, the order of Assassins, which was the terror of the world for two centuries. Because they had their headquarters on Mount Lebanon, their ruler was referred to by the Crusaders as the Old Man of the Mountain. His Arabic title was Sheik Al-Jebal, Master of the Mountain, and——"

Carter snapped his fingers sharply. "I get it!" he announced. "That understudy to the Black Crook said, 'Two new recruits to the Sheik Al-Jebal's forces! Whoever heads this outfit is carrying on the reincarnation of that old geezer from Mount Lebanon. Boy, are we in with one swell bunch of murderers, or are we in with 'em?'"

"I rather think we are," responded the professor with a wry grimace, "and if I'm not mistaken, they're looking for us now."

Even as he spoke there came the thud of slippers on the marble floor, and a squad of turbaned warriors armed with gleaming simitars crowded through an archway.

"Jig's up, Professor, nothing for it but to give 'em the works," said Carter cheerfully, leaping from the shelter of the couch and facing their pursuers.

"Come and get it, you gazabos," he invited, snatching the cover from the nearest couch and twirling it before him

as a toreador whirls his cloak to lure the bull to charge.

Startled by his strange maneuver of defense, no less than by his sudden appearance, the armed men hesitated for a second, and while they bunched together at the doorway Carter threw the robe, enveloping the heads of the four nearest to him. With a bellow he was on them, striking flailing fist-blows, kicking viciously, shouting wild defiance.

Professor Merrill grasped a pillow from the nearest couch, and holding it before him as a shield rushed on a swordsman who escaped the robe that Carter flung. The man swung at him with his gleaming blade; Merrill caught the down-stroke on his pillow, and ere his enemy could raise his simitar to strike again, kicked him in the stomach, seized the weapon which fell clattering to the floor, and rushed to Carter's aid.

"Atta baby, Prof!" yelled Carter as he swung an uppercut which sent a turbaned swordsman doubled up against the wall: "Give 'em the business. We'll stand these babies up—duck! they're flanking us!"

The warning came a thought too late. While they engaged the squad of guards, another party had slipped through an archway, circled round them and, as Carter yelled, descended on them from the rear.

Professor Merrill staggered backward, tripping as he reeled, felt the semi-darkness deepen to absolute blackness as a pall descended on his head, and once more smelled the sweetish, pungent odor of the anesthetic which had overcome him on the road. He heard Tom Carter choke and gasp as he, too, fell a victim to the rear attack, seemed to feel his head expanding like a rubber bladder pumped with air, beheld a myriad flashing lights before his eyes, then buckled at the knees

and sank down limply on the purple carpet, like a doll from which the sawdust has run out.

WITH a start like that of one who awakens at the cachinnation of an alarm clock, Professor Merrill came to consciousness. He was lying on a couch which stood some eighteen inches from the floor of a small whitewashed room illuminated by a swinging three-wicket brazen lamp hung pendant from the ceiling. Another couch like his against the farther wall, a little table of dark wood inlaid with brass and holding trays of fruits and sweetmeats, and a thin, hard Hamadan carpet seemed to be the room's sole furnishings.

"Carter!" he called. "Are you all right? Did you get hurt?"

"Mr. Carter's quite all right, Professor," came a soft voice from the arching doorway. "He did some injury to our men before they could subdue him, but, except for ruffled dignity, I think he suffered nothing."

Turning on his pillow Merrill recognized the speaker as the man whom they had met when first recovering consciousness after their kidnapping. He had changed his Occidental evening clothes for a long, tight-fitting garment of white linen on the left breast of which was stamped or painted the device of a scarlet, hiltless dagger. Instead of patent-leather evening pumps he wore soft slippers of red leather with exaggeratedly turned-up toes. His turban was replaced by a red fez at least a full size large for him, so that it rested almost on his ears. As he turned his head Professor Merrill saw the scalp below his fez was innocent of hair. The man was bald as an egg.

"Where——" began Professor Merrill, then checked abruptly as he sat bolt-upright on his couch. His clothes were

gone, and in their place was a knee-length sleeveless garment of white linen, bound about the middle with a scarlet sash, blazoned on the left breast with the design of a scarlet dagger. Beside his bed he saw a red tarboosh and a pair of heelless red Morocco slippers.

"I say——" involuntarily the professor raised a hand to his head, then brought it down with an exclamation of dismay. Instead of curling brown hair, lightly mixed with gray, his fingers had encountered naked, smooth-shaved scalp.

"My clothes—my hair——" he stammered wrathfully, his anger rendering him almost incoherent..

The other smiled, not pleasantly. "I shouldn't use the possessive case if I were you, Professor," he advised. "Everything here, including your clothes, your hair and yourself, is the absolute property of the Master"—as he spoke the name he crossed his hands upon his breast, closed his eyes and bowed his head in reverence—"to do with as he pleases.

"And while we are about it, you will hereafter be known as Iskandar. Is that plain? Once one has had the ineffable honor of being accepted as the Master's slave his other worldly attributes are cast aside; he has no name, no title, no individuality, no right to live, save as it may please the Master to bestow them. All things here are his, to give or take away."

"I'll be damned——" began Professor Merrill, but the other cut him short.

"You will surely think yourself in hell, whether you are damned or not, if you have occasion to encounter the dispensers of discipline. Come, follow me; a little object lesson may suffice to break your stubborn pride."

Reluctantly, but filled with curiosity, Merrill rose and donned his fez and slippers. They passed along a narrow, lamp-

lit corridor, passed half a dozen guarded doors, finally began descending a steep spiral stair which led down in a sort of well. Seventy steps, each about a foot in height, Merrill counted before his guide halted at a door of heavy planks cross-barred with iron, and rapped upon it sharply.

As the portal swung before them on a pair of creaking hinges a dank, damp odor, reminiscent of a cellar—or a tomb—assailed their nostrils, and from the darkness of the vault there came a little sobbing, whimpering sound, as though a child were suffering.

"Lights, O monstrous uncouthness!" growled the guide, and in a moment came the click of flint on steel, the glow of tinder set afire, finally the thin, unsteady gleaming of a candle-lantern.

THE man who held the light was scarcely visible, his form looming dimly indistinct, like a shadow thrown upon a shadow, but Professor Merrill's interest in the lantern-bearer ceased as he beheld the form the feeble light shone on.

It was a girl, young, beautiful, exquisitely fashioned, but so racked with pain and helpless agony that she scarcely seemed a human thing. Her feet were fixed in stocks set some two feet from the floor, her body was supported on her upright arms. Beneath her, where her head and shoulders must inevitably rest when the weakening arms could no longer support her body weight, was a plank thick set with eight-inch, needle-pointed spikes. A mass of pockmark-wounds, thick with drying blood, upon her neck and shoulders told where she had once let herself down for an instant's respite, then forced her tortured arms once more to raise her pain-racked body to the level of her feet.

"She disobeyed an order," Merrill's guide said softly. "Those who fail to do

the instant bidding of the Master or the servants who transmit his orders get no second chance. She has been here for three hours. She should not last——”

“*Yab Sidi*, kill me; kill me quickly, for the memory of your mother!” begged the girl through writhing lips. “I can’t stand it——”

“O countenance of misfortune, this is thine own doing,” answered Merrill’s guide. “Our lord was very merciful; he forgave thy first transgression with no more punishment than the lash, but he has no use for those who scorn his clemency. Pray for death, daughter of a pig; it is thy sole chance of release.”

The girl’s eyes widened in the candle-light. Her small, white teeth clinched on her lower lip until a little stream of mixed blood and spittle trickled down her chin. “*Damn you!*” she screamed; “*damn you for the rotten beasts you are!*” and bent her arms till the biceps stood out in little knots against her pallid skin. A moment she poised thus, then straightened both her arms, forcing her body upward in a little spring, and let herself fall back.

The muscles of her torso rippled in reflex reaction as the cruel spikes pierced her back and neck, but she gave no cry. Merrill felt a wave of nausea sweeping over him, but checked it as he realized death had dealt her quick release. He knew enough anatomy to convince him that a spike had pierced her spinal column, severing it at once and bringing instant surcease of all suffering.

“Too bad,” remarked his guide. “I must have the torture-master whipped for that; those spikes should be so placed that prisoners undergoing torture can’t kill themselves so easily.” He chuckled softly; then:

“That is just a little object lesson, Iskandar. Should you prove difficult we

might give you a worse punishment than that. For instance——” he laid a hand upon Professor Merrill’s arm and drew him toward a narrow door pierced with an iron grille. “Look in,” he ordered tersely.

As the attendant flashed the lantern rays into the darkened chamber Merrill glimpsed a movement in the shadow, then heard a low, warning hiss. Half coiled upon the sand with which the little room was floored, but undulating in knots and bends and subtle figure-eights, was a great python, fully twenty feet in length.

“He’s hungry, you see,” the guide advised him with a laugh. “He eats but once in thirty days or so, and we haven’t had a prisoner for him in some time. Think of that, Iskandar. Remember that the Master’s little pet is hungry—very hungry—if you feel an inclination to disobey the slightest order which is given you. Shall we go? Your friend Mansur—he who was Thomas Carter—will be returning soon, and you’ll be interested in hearing his experiences, as he will be in hearing yours.”

WHEN Tom Carter opened his eyes they looked upon a garden, or rather on the simulation of a garden. In a long, vaulted hall whose ceiling, painted blue, was pierced with little star-shaped holes through which soft light-rays filtered, was spread a heavy carpet of dull green, while here and there stood wide-mouthed vases, big as tubs, in which were set orange, palm or rose trees, all cunningly finished to simulate the living growths. White pigeons perched in the trees, or walked about beneath them, heads bobbing, wings aflutter, pausing now and then to utter resonant coos and engage in violent love-making. Here and there beneath the trees were little bright-hued rugs, and on them men were lying.

Drunk, they seemed at first, yet at a second glance he decided otherwise. Rather, it seemed, they were mad, or held in some strange seizure, for they lay there, staring at the artificial sky, muttering strange, half-audible phrases of endearment, while on their faces were expressions of wild, unholy rapture. Sometimes they rose with difficulty and lurched a few unsteady steps with outspread hands until their arms closed as though enfolding an invisible form, and as they acted this strange pantomime they babbled incoherent words through lips so flaccid that they could not frame the syllables they sought to say.

"Tommy, old scout, you're in a bug-house, no doubt of it," he told himself, watching a near-by man rise, stagger a few steps and fall. But:

"What the cross-eyed devil?" he ejaculated softly as he saw an unclothed woman glide out from the shelter of a bank of potted palms, kneel a moment at the fallen man's head and whisper in his ear. Then from a silver jar she detached the wide-mouthed silver goblet which served it as a lid, poured out a draft of amber-colored liquor and held it up to the man's mouth, supporting his head in the crook of her free elbow as a mother might hold up the head of a sick child to whom she gave a dose of medicine.

The man drank greedily, held up his hands to stroke the fair cup-bearer's cheeks, but fell back in a sort of swoon, lying rigidly upon his rug, staring sightlessly with wide-set, dreamy eyes up to the painted ceiling.

"Well, I should kiss a small-sized monkey!" muttered Carter, sitting up upon his rug. "If that bird ain't—hey, what the sizzling hell?" Sitting, he discovered that his legs and feet were bare, and that a sleeveless linen smock, close-

belted with a sash of crimson silk, replaced the garments he had worn. He dropped back to the rug, staring at the branches of the imitation rose tree under which he lay; then: "What's the matter with my head?" he asked, sat up again and raised a hand to the back of his neck. His fingers traveled upward, clear across the vault of his skull, down to his forehead, encountering no resistance. "Well, I'll be a Republican in Mississippi! Bald!" he exclaimed. Half rising from his rug, he sat again in utter, stupefied amazement.

The tinkling chime of silver ankle-bells fell on his ears as three girls ran swiftly into view. Like the girl whom he and Merrill had discovered earlier, they were naked, save for silver ornaments on breast and wrist and ankle, and in their youthful nakedness their beauty was so poignant that it struck him like a blow. One bore a zither, another wore small silver cymbals on her thumbs and forefingers, the third held poised between her delicate, long-fingered hands a crystal goblet fashioned like a lotus bud, and in it glowed an amber-colored liquor.

Kneeling on the grass-green carpet at his feet, the women smiled at him seductively, and as the zither-player struck her cords and the cymbal-wearer clashed her little silver plates together with a chiming, clinking rhythm which beat out the tempo, the girl who bore the cup began to sing in a high, thin soprano:

The nightingale sings in the rose tree,
The moon breasts the surf of the sky,
And the glance of thine eyes holds me bound in
a thrall,
For the slave of thy passion am I.

A girdle to bind round thy waist,
Or a brooch at thy throat I would be,
Or I'd turn to the shoe which is happily placed
On thy foot to be trod by thee. . . .

And now soft, scented arms slipped round his neck, and a woman's cheek

touched his, while a woman's soft hands turned his face from the musicians and her lips sought his in breathless eagerness. As she kissed him she opened her mouth, and the scent of her breath was the scent of perfumed wine, stirring his befuddled senses, rousing his pulses to a furious drum-beat of desire.

"O moon of my delight, O heart of a thousand roses," the girl whispered between kisses almost fierce as bites, "O essence of apples in the sweetness of full summer—*now do you realize why I asked you to kill me in that room back there? O bringer of delights—I must do this with any man they say, or perish by the death of spikes or by the snake—lie in my arms, beloved, cool thy hot face between my bosoms—for God's sake, realize I'm forced to this and be kind to me—O song of the nightingale, O perfume of the jasmine flower—don't swallow any of the wine; hold it in your mouth and pretend to get drunk quickly!*" She signed to the woman with the cup, took it from her and held it to his lips.

He followed her instructions, drinking in the strong, musk-scented wine, holding it in his mouth till he thought his cheeks would burst. The girl leant over him, interposing herself between him and the others; as he finished drinking she flung the cup across her shoulder, wrapped him in her arms, pressing her slender perfumed body close to his as she bore him backward.

"Quick," she whispered fiercely as his shoulders touched the rug, "lean over me, pretend to kiss me, and let the wine run from your mouth into mine." She twined herself about him, bending her head and shoulders to the side until his face was over hers, the back of his shaven head hiding their lips from the other women. "Now!" she commanded, placing opened lips against his mouth.

Carter drew his lips apart, felt the flow of perfumed wine across them, sensed, rather than saw, that the girl had turned her face aside, letting the liquor spill from her mouth onto the green carpet. Then she was kissing him again, whispering almost soundlessly between caresses: "I've saved your soul—for a little while—now pretend to be unconscious. Don't close your eyes, just lie here like the other men and seem to dream!"

"O. K., sister, I get you," he replied, giving her a quick kiss in return, then slowly loosed his hold upon her shoulders, let his hands fall flaccidly beside him, finally lay staring with wide eyes up at the painted ceiling.

"*Hou,*" laughed the girl who played the zither, "the wine worked quickly with that one. By Allah, were I a man I should not let thee go so quickly, little Zil-i-Gulab, though they gave me wine enough to drown a whale!"

Carter had not watched the other men in vain. For something like five minutes he lay staring at the vaulted roof, then began to mutter vaguely, half rose from his couch, dropped back again, hiding his face upon his folded arms and occasionally kicking restlessly, like a sleeper troubled in his dreams.

"Smart girl," he told himself, gradually working his sleeping-rug over the spot of moisture left when she spat out the wine. "That stuff was drugged, no doubt of it; that's why those birds act so cuckoo. And they make her act like that—the poor kid! I'd like to wring their necks! Guess it's my best bet to lie here quietly, though, and see what happens next."

He rested his cheek upon his folded arm and stared across the green-floored room, nor was it the drugged wine that brought the dreamy look into his eyes. Soft arms about his neck, soft, scented

lips on his, the thrill of love words whispered close against his mouth—even if she had done it because they made her it was sweet, he told himself. Suppose they hadn't forced her to make love to him, would she——

A SHUFFLING step beside him woke him from his reverie and he looked up to behold the man whom he and Merrill had encountered in the red room standing by him, smiling. "Are you able to stand, Mansur?" he asked with a knowing laugh.

"Mansur?" echoed Carter.

"That is your name henceforth," the other answered with a sudden tightening of his lips. "See that you recognize it when you hear it called."

"O. K.," responded Carter. "What's next?" He sat up unsteadily, holding his hands against his temples. "Gosh, that's powerful stuff—guess I took a little bit too much," he confided with a shame-faced grin.

"Your companion Iskandar is waiting in your chamber," his guide informed him as they traversed a long corridor. "Tomorrow you and he shall stand before the Presence to receive your orders. You will probably be assigned to the guard, for you are a good fighter."

"If it's all the same to you, I'd like to have a job that'll keep me in touch with that little bimbo I met back in the garden," Carter answered.

"Silence!" snapped the other. "All things are as the Master"—he bowed his head in homage—"wills. The favors of the women of the garden are bestowed as a reward of merit, and the woman in whose arms you lie is she the Master chooses. For those who prove refractory we have other methods of reward. Iskandar will tell you of it."

"Who the deuce is Iskandar?"

"The man who came here with you. And you must no longer address me so familiarly. I am majordomo of the palace, and as such am called Excellence or, when spoken to directly, *yab Sidi*. Do you understand?"

"O. K.," responded Carter, and next instant started back with flaming cheeks, for his guide had struck him in the face.

"Do you need the lash to teach you humbleness, or have you learned to speak becomingly?" snarled the guide.

Carter's right hand knotted to a fist, but better judgment conquered anger. "Yes, *yab Sidi*," he replied.

A slave was kneeling on the marble pavement at the passage bend, a little, paunchy man with shaven head, clothed only in a breech-clout. Beside him was a pail of soapy water, in one hand he held a cloth with which he scrubbed the marble tiles, and as he worked the tears fell from his eyes, making little splashes in the dirty water of his pail.

"That one was marked for favor, but he forfeited it by disobedience," the majordomo said. "We had to lash him twice, and then we took him down to visit Naa. I do not think that he will give us further trouble."

As they neared the scrubbing man he glanced up quickly, saw who came, and dropped his wash-rag in his pail, then bent his forehead to the floor, clasping his hands across the nape of his neck. Across his naked back a lattice-work of angry, half-healed lash marks showed.

"O miserable descendant of misbegotten pigs," said Carter's guide, "lift up your uncouth countenance that we may look upon it."

In trembling obedience the prostrate man complied, and Carter put his hand across his mouth to stifle back a gasp, but the majordomo was too intent upon the kneeling wretch to notice his amazement.

"Pick up thy pail, thou thing of filth," the majordomo ordered, and as the trembling slave obeyed: "Lift it to thy lips and drink, drink every drop it holds, or——"

Something like relief showed in the scullion's face as he raised the pail of foul water to his mouth. "Harkening and obedience, *yab Sidi*; Allah bless thee for thy clemency!" he replied through trembling lips, and began to gulp the contents of his scrub-pail as though it had been nectar.

"Thus am I obeyed by all save one in this place," Carter's guide informed him as they turned away.

PROFESSOR MERRILL sat upon his couch, elbows on knees, hands clasped before him, staring moodily at the floor between his slippered feet. "Hullo, Carter," he greeted without raising his eyes as his fellow prisoner joined him. "Where've you been?"

"Man," answered Carter, dropping down upon his couch, "I've been in heaven, or in the best little imitation of the Prophet's Paradise to come you're likely to find this side of Jordan. Listen." Briefly, he recited his adventures; then:

"Wonder what that poor kid meant when she said she had to act that way or suffer death by spikes or the snake? Where were you while this was going on, Prof.?"

"In hell," the other answered. "You saw the bestial system of rewards they have; I saw their beastly punishments. You asked about the spiked death, and the snake? Here's what she meant——"

"Well, I'll be a chimpanzee's first cousin, darned if I won't!" ejaculated Carter as Merrill ended his recital. "So that's the kind of guys these guys are, eh? So long, Prof., I'll be seeing you."

"Where are you going?"

"Snooping. Just snooping, Professor. Everything seems quiet on the Western Front right now."

He was gone an hour, and his boyish grin seemed even wider than usual when he returned. "Found out lots of things, Professor," he announced. "Practically everything except what I wanted to know. I don't suppose it's any news to you that we're in a kind of cellar, but maybe you'll be interested to know we're under water for the most part. Yes, sir, this entire place is hollowed out of the mud under the salt marshes; we can't be more than half a mile from the road. There are about forty people here, all told. You and I and the girl and another feller are the only folks from this neck of the woods. The rest are Simon-pure Syrians, imported to this country by the boss clown of this crazy circus. Maybe the immigration officers wouldn't like to hear about that, eh?"

"The girl I saw kill herself was kidnapped; too," Merrill added, "and we don't know how many others have died here. Who's the other man?"

"Max Mendelbaum."

"What, the broker who disappeared two months ago?"

"Righto. I ran on him by accident; caught him mopping floors. He's worth a hundred thousand to us, too."

"To us?"

"Oh, excuse me, I forgot you didn't know. That line I gave the first assistant boss out in the red room about my being an unemployed accountant was purest hokey undefiled. I'm an investigator for the Grand Central Life Assurance Company. Mendelbaum and Steinmann, his partner, had policies of a hundred thousand dollars on each other's lives. At eight o'clock in the evening of May 31 Max Mendelbaum left Patchogue in his car, headed for New York. It was a foggy

night along the South Shore Road, and next morning State troopers found Mendelbaum's car wrecked beside a big tree growing at the roadside, and the body of his colored chauffeur lying not far away. The colored man was murdered, killed by a knife wound, but of Mendelbaum there was no trace, nor could any clue to him be found. No letters demanding ransom money have been received by his family, so Steinmann's on our necks to pay him the face value of the policy. I'd been scouting round near where Mendelbaum's car was found when I met you, and—boy, there's a connection there, sure as a gun's made of iron!"

"What?" asked Merrill listlessly.

"That tree, man. It's the only piece of vegetation higher than your head for miles around; Mendelbaum's car was wrecked near it, we saw that phantom car bearing down on us almost in its shadow just before they hung the bag on us; that little girl—you know, the one they call Zil-i-Gulab—told us she had the same experience. Yes, sir, the answer's bound up somewhere in that tree or I'm an organ-grinder's monkey."

"What difference does it make?" Merrill rejoined. "Your man Mendelbaum may be worth a hundred thousand to your company outside, but he's about as useful to you here as a bag of gold would be to a starving shipwrecked sailor on a desert island."

"Oh yeah?" Carter answered with a grin. "You just keep an eye on Uncle Thomas. I'm going to salaam these guys up one side and down the other, string along with 'em like nobody's business, and keep both eyes wide open. Sooner or later I'll find the exit to this dump, and when I do we'll all go bye-bye!"

"Humph!" grunted Merrill as he lay down on his couch and composed himself for sleep.

W. T. — 2

How long they slept neither of them knew, for their watches had been taken from them with their clothes, and in all the subterranean palace there seemed to be no sort of timepiece.

Carter wakened first, feeling himself prodded in the back by something hard. Rolling over with a yawn he beheld the hunchbacked dwarf standing over him, whip in hand, an evil smile upon his ugly features.

"Rise, O man," the hunchback ordered harshly. "The hour has come for you to lick the dust before the Presence."

"Yeah?" responded Carter. "Be careful how you use that whip when I'm around, feller, or you'll be eating whole mouthfuls of dust, an' not tasting 'em. Do I get breakfast?"

The hunchback pointed to the taboret on which there stood a bowl of fruit, then indicated a heap of clothes which lay beside the couch. "Make haste and dress," he ordered. "I wait without."

"Suits me," responded Carter; "I'd a dam' sight rather see your back than your face, any time."

"Hey, Prof.," he shook Professor Merrill by the shoulder, "get up. We're going to a party, and our little playmate's brought us some new pretties."

The costumes which the drawf had brought consisted of short white linen smocks, embroidered on the breast with the emblem of the scarlet dagger, longer coats of violet silk with loosely flowing sleeves, turbans of red silk and soft red leather slippers. A waist shawl of yellow silk completed the ensemble. Arrayed in their new finery they ate a little fruit, drank a goblet of water and joined their ill-favored guide.

Down several winding corridors they passed, glimpsing the garden where Carter had awakened the evening previous, coming at last to halt before a curtained

archway guarded by two men in chain-mail, drawn swords in their hands. These eyed them stonily, but offered neither salute nor hindrance as they passed through the portal in the wake of their misshapen conductor.

"Excellence," announced the hunchback, "here are the two new ones, ready to be received by the Presence." He groveled like an ingratiating dog before the majordomo.

The latter was gorgeously appareled. A suit of glittering chain-mail clothed him from throat to ankles, and upon his head he wore a conical steel cap fitted with a nose guard. Belted to his waist was a jeweled simitar, while a cloak of violet tissue hung from his shoulders nearly to his heels. Slippers of blue leather worked with silver were upon his feet.

Kneeling before him on the marble floor were Zil-i-Gulab and the three girls who had been her companions in the garden, one carrying her zither, one wearing tiny silver cymbals on her finger tips, the third bearing a little golden pipe.

The majordomo clapped his hands and the three musicians rose, advanced a pace and made him a low reverence, whereupon to the tinkling accompaniment of finger-cymbals, pipe and zither took up a low, wailing tune, the players keeping time by stamping their feet and turning rhythmically as they advanced toward a curtained doorway at the long hall's farther end. Zil-i-Gulab poised upon her henna-painted toes, raised her arms above her head, turning her hands inward, fingers tip to tip, and began to spin, whirling faster and faster, till the hawk bills on her wrists and ankles rang so rapidly that their music seemed a high, continuous whirl. Thus preceded, the majordomo motioned Merrill and Carter to follow, and the strange procession made its way along the corridor.

Guards drew aside the silken draperies of the door, that the dancing women might proceed unhindered, and the three men entered in their wake.

The room was walled with gold, vaulted at the roof with gleaming silver, floored with stone of bloody red. Scores of lamps burned brightly, striking back dazzling reflections from the burnished metal walls and ceiling. A line of guards was drawn up across the farther wall, their shining naked swords catching bright reflections from the lamps and walls and glistening ceiling. Along the room's sides was ranged a miscellany of the palace servants, women veiled and unveiled, clothed, partly clothed, and wholly nude, black slaves in turban and breech-clout, white slaves similarly attired; among them Carter noted Mendelbaum.

Surrounded by the line of guards, a dais of polished wood was raised, its entire top covered by a scarlet pillow fully a foot thick and obviously filled with some soft wadding, for the man upon it had sunk down until he seemed almost enveloped in its billowing folds. He was a little man, scarcely larger than a child, but the head which topped his narrow shoulders was enormous, and its size was magnified by the huge red turban which he wore. All red—the monstrous pillow, the robe worn by him who sat upon it, the turban bound about his head, the jewels which glistened on his claw-like hands. But his face was pasty-pale, and from it looked a pair of hot, dry, glittering eyes, unchanging in expression, unwinking in their fixed, set stare as those of some great snake.

Despite themselves the visitors trembled. They were men, this was a man, but between them the contrast was like that of life to death, or sanity to madness.

"Lord love a duck!" Tom Carter whispered. "If it ain't——"

"Men of earth, ye stand before the Lord of Life and Death. Draw nigh and give your homage!" the majordomo cried, dropping to his knees and bending till his forehead nearly touched the floor.

ZIL-I-GULAB ceased her whirling dance, ran forward and flung herself face-downward on the floor, arms stretched to fullest length before her, palms up, feet crossed, the instep of the right resting in the hollow of the sole of the left. The musicians prostrated themselves, too, but instead of lying rigid as Zil-i-Gulab did, they writhed upon the scarlet stones, weaving a sort of pattern with their naked bodies, the quick ripple of their pallid flesh like the motion of water stirred by wind. A thrill of revulsion ran through Carter and Merrill simultaneously as they saw the four women had thrust forth their tongues and were licking at the pavement while they lay prostrate.

"Down, slaves, and lick the dust!" cried the majordomo, rising from his knees and glaring at Merrill and Carter.

"Oh, please, please don't anger him!" Zil-i-Gulab raised her forehead from the floor and looked across her shoulder, terror in her violet eyes as she besought obedience to the order.

The form upon the cushion stirred—it was like the stirring of a serpent when something angers it—and a low hiss issued from it.

"Who dares to speak unbidden in the Presence of the Master?" cried the majordomo, and from the huddled heap upon the cushion came two words:

"The lash!"

"Forgive—be merciful—have pity, Awful Master!" Zil-i-Gulab cowered till it seemed she sought to force her body through the scarlet paving-stones, balling her hands into little fists and beating them, her crossed feet and her forehead

against the floor in a very ecstasy of terror and supplication.

"Silence, thing!" the majordomo shouted, and the hunchback dwarf sidled forward with a gliding walk, his cruel iron-tipped whip coiled about his wrist, a grin of savage expectation on his hideous countenance.

He drew the lash back quickly, whirled it twice about his head so that it whistled with a vicious hissing scream, then dropped back on one foot, poised the whip for a down-stroke which should cut the tender, wincing back to ribbons, and—fell sprawling to the floor, blood spurt-ing from his mashed lips as Tom Carter drove a fist into his leering, twisted mouth.

Berserk, Carter faced the startled guards and slaves. "Any of you other birds want a taste of this?" he shook his clenched fist aloft. "There's plenty more where that came from!

"As for you, you damned, murdering lunatic——" he made a spring toward the form huddled on the scarlet cushion, but a dozen guardsmen fell upon him and bore him cursing to the floor.

"Shall I strike, my lord?" asked the majordomo, unsheathing his simitar and standing over Carter.

"No," came the whispered answer. "Put him in restraint until the second hour of the watch; then let him go to dine with Naa."

A stillness filled the room, a breathless silence such as men maintain when they look full-featured in the bare-boned face of death. Naa, the great snake, the mighty breaker of bones, the monster who could crush a man as easily as a man could crush an egg—and who was active now with appetite, having fasted thirty days!

Only the faint, whimpering sobs of the nude girl groveling prostrate on the floor

and the heavy breathing of the guards, still panting from their fight with Carter, sounded as the armed men closed about their prisoner and half led, half dragged him from the room.

ARMS bound behind him at the elbows, naked as the instant he first looked upon the world, Tom Carter stood between his guards at the torture chamber entrance.

"Open!" cried the palace majordomo, striking on the panels with the pommel of his sword. "One comes to dine with Naa!"

"Do we accompany thee, *yab Sidi?*" asked a guardsman, grinning in anticipation of the show.

"No, it is not meet that any but me, who am the Master's other self, and the torturers, who never leave their posts, should see this spectacle of death," the majordomo answered. "Stand ye here and wait my coming forth." To Carter:

"Go forward, creature of calamity; a soft embrace awaits thee."

A shuffling step was heard within the torture dungeon, bolts squealed, a bar fell clanking, and the heavy, iron-bound door creaked open a few inches.

"Lights, fool, knowest thou not I bring a guest for Lord Naa's table?" cried the majordomo as they stood in utter darkness while the dungeon door creaked shut and heavy bolts were drawn across it.

The click of flint on steel, the brightening glow of tinder blown upon, finally the feeble gleam of candlelight showed through the gloom as the torture-master raised his lantern, flashing it on Carter's white, drawn face and straining shoulder muscles. Then the lamp was lowered, clearing a little path of light across the dungeon floor, a path which marked Tom Carter's *Via Dolorosa*.

A hand fell on his arm to guide him,

and he started at the contact. It was no calloused palm, worn horny by the rack and torture-irons, but a soft, slim hand, a hand whose questing fingers fluttered searchingly along his forearm, feeling for the rawhide thongs that bound his elbows. He felt the first cord give, the second and the third fall off as steel sheared through them, then suddenly realized that his arms were free and that a knife-haft had been slipped into his hand.

No order was required. Swiftly as a striking snake he turned, drove the knife blade handle-deep into the majordomo's throat, then, as a spate of blood gushed on his fingers, gave the steel a wrenching twist.

The fellow staggered backward with a strangling cry. "*Ahee,*" one guardsman murmured to the other as he drew his ear back from the door, "my lord Naa wasted little time to make his kill today, it seems."

Light fingers flickered upward through the dark, feeling Carter's cheeks. "Are you all right?" a girl's voice whispered tremulously. "They haven't hurt you?"

"Zil-i-Gulab!" Carter cried out. "How did——"

"*S-s-sh!*" she laid a warning finger on his lips. "Speak softly, dear; we've only a few minutes."

"But, Zil——"

"Don't call me that, my dear. For the little while I have of life, I'll be Dale Carswell once again."

He took her cheeks between his palms. "How did you manage it, and *why* did you take this awful risk, honey?" he asked softly. "You might have stayed up there, and——"

"What is your name?" she interrupted in a whisper.

"Tom Carter."

"Then listen, Tommy darling. This is no time to heed convention. I love you;

I've loved you from the moment I first saw you, and when you knocked that eunuch down when he was about to flog me, I knew you'd sealed your fate—and mine. 'Whither thou goest I will go, where thou diest I will die,' Tom dear.

"I stole drugged wine and brought it to the torturers. They seldom are admitted to the garden, and they'd sell their souls for a cup of wine mixed with gunjah. They're lying here unconscious now. Then I took the gunjah that they used to drug the wine and smeared the feathers of four pigeons with it. I put them in Naa's den, and he swallowed them. Now he's so stupefied that he can hardly move."

"Dale dear," said Tom, and his voice was well-nigh silenced by the pounding of his heart, "say you'll marry me when we get out of here."

The girl laughed softly, mirthlessly. "There is neither marrying nor giving in marriage where we're going when we get out of here, Tom darling," she replied. "We've only a few moments—an hour, at most—left to live. Even if we kill or bind the torturers and even if the guards can't batter down the door, they can blow their sleeping-gas in through the grille, and cut the door away while we're unconscious. We must be dead before they get us, Tommy dear." She stifled a low sigh. "It would be sweet to marry you," she added in a tear-choked voice, "but the only sacrament which we can share is death."

Tom put his arms about her satin shoulders and held her close against him, comforting her as one would soothe a weeping child. "Listen, honey-lamb," he whispered, "we're not done for yet. I've got a hunch. Last night I went over this dump with a fine-toothed comb—all but this part. Are you with me?"

She rubbed a tear-stained cheek against

his shoulder, then raised her face and looked at him. "What——" she began, but:

"Don't ask questions, honey-bud; bring the light and follow on," he ordered, holding her away and grinning down at her.

Together, hand in hand, they walked across the dungeon, paused before a low, barred door and fumbled at its fastenings. "Angel-pie, we're getting warm," he whispered jubilantly. "Feel that draft? See that candle flicker. I haven't felt a breath of breeze before since I came into this hell-hole!"

The door gave way beneath their pressure and before them rose a flight of spiral stairs, leading upward through a well no wider than a manhole.

Up, up they climbed, at last they reached an iron hatchway fastened with a massive lock. "No dice!" Tom muttered disappointedly after fumbling with the lock a moment. "Never mind, we're not licked yet; wait here; be with you in a jiffy."

Half falling in his haste, he dashed down the stairs, seized a heavy iron bar and rushed back to the waiting girl. "Stand clear," he ordered, "there's a cataclysm coming." Inserting the bar in the hasp which held the latch he wrenched and wrenched again, throwing his whole weight against it. The rusty iron screamed like a tortured living thing, then, with a snap like the discharge of a pistol, gave way suddenly, letting him fall sitting on the topmost step. "Damn!" he exclaimed involuntarily, as he rose and rubbed his bruised posterior, then forgot his pain as he forced his shoulder against the hatch and heaved with all his might. The trap-door opened, and a flood of gray, fog-filtered light fell on them.

On every side, stretching to infinity, it seemed, the grass-grown salt marsh lay,

while the lapping of the ocean sounded in their ears.

"Who says we won't stand up before the devil-dodger and tell him that we do?" he asked. "Tum—tum—te-tum!" he hummed the opening bars of the Bridal Chorus from Lohengrin, then bent and kissed the girl upon the lips.

"Oh, my dear, my precious dear; it's too wonderful to be true!" she wept. "We were lost and are found; we were dead—worse than dead—damned!—and are alive again. Come, let's go quickly, dearest love!"

"O. K.," he answered cheerfully; then: "Hey, hold on, baby, there's a guy back there I got to get—and we're no nudists; we gotta have some clothes!"

For the first time, seemingly, she realized her nakedness, and the bright blood stained her cheeks, but: "Send the police back for him," she urged; "if we wait——"

"And run the risk of that homicidal maniac bumping him off in the meantime? Not much! Come on, I've got a pip of an idea—if it works.

"You're sure you fed that snake a nice, big tummy-full of hashish?" he asked as they regained the torture chamber.

"Yes, he was perfectly quiet when I last looked in his den."

"All right, here's hoping he stays that way a little while. Help me truss these bozos up, will you, honey?"

THEY stripped the clothing from the torturers, bound them fast and gagged them; then, as Carter clothed himself in the red garments which the torture-master wore: "I'd better put the kibosh on those babies at the door," he told her, picking up a burning-iron and grasping it cudgelwise.

The guards came to attention as the door rasped open, raised their right hands

in salute, and went down like a pair of pole-axed oxen as Carter swung his crow-bar.

"All clear," he whispered as he dragged his victims in; "now for that sublimated fishing-worm of yours."

The giant reptile lay half coiled, its ugly, wedge-shaped head resting on a fold of its great body, only the rhythmic swelling and deflation of its barrel-like sides as it breathed showing it still lived. "In you go, old scout," Tom Carter told it, thrusting, tugging and hauling till he finished bundling the serpent in the folds of the red cloak which had adorned the torture-master's shoulders.

Two hundred and fifty pounds of snake is no light burden, even when it lies quiescent; when it wakes in outraged dignity and begins to writhe and force its mighty coils apart, to carry it is almost more than mortal man can do; yet Carter did it.

Hunched over like a peddler burdened with his pack, he bore the squirming reptile up the stairs, traversed corridor on corridor, finally reached the throne room where the master waited for the majordomo to bring word Naa had eaten.

Guards at the door were startled as they saw the torture-master stagger forward with his burden and beheld the dancing-girl who followed meekly in his wake, but none approached the Master save by his command—who were they to question the dread keeper of the dungeons? They raised their sabers in salute and held the curtains back.

"Ha, what is this? Why come you here, O monstrous vileness?" cried the man in red upon the scarlet dais as Carter staggered through the door. "Did Naaman send thee? Has Naa eaten?"

"Not yet, but in a minute, buddy," Carter answered, dumping his bundle unceremoniously on the throne room's scar-

let floor and dragging back the hampering cloak from the great reptile's coils.

"Go to it, baby, dinner's on the table!" he invited, leaping back beyond the flailing of the python's tail.

Pandemonium followed chaos. Screams, curses, cries went ringing through the vaulted hall. A guard rushed at the python, simitar upraised. Like a battering-ram the horn-hard nose of the great creature struck him down, and, rippling like a hell-tide, it slithered over the red-varnished floor—straight toward the red-robed man upon the scarlet throne.

There was a hiss like steam escaping from a safety-valve. A scream of mortal terror, ending in a strangled cry. . . .

"H'm, he could dish it out, but he can't take it," Carter muttered; then: "Come on, Professor Merrill, scam! You, too, buddy, I need you in my business!" He seized Merrill by the arm with one hand, Max Mendelbaum with the other, and they dashed from that room where wild confusion reigned.

Hurrying guardsmen passed them on the run; none sought to stop or question them; everyone was rushing somewhere, and their haste occasioned no suspicion.

"Grab up some clothes for Mendelbaum," Carter ordered as they reached the torture chamber and barred the door.

Dale Carswell donned a torturer's red robe and skull-cap, Mendelbaum did likewise, and together they went climbing up the stairway of escape in frantic haste.

The tide was rising. Even as they reached the hatchway it was lapping round the coping, but they paid no heed. Splashing, falling, cutting themselves on the tough grass, they made their way shoreward, toward the ribbon of the South Road's pavement.

"Good Lord!" cried Carter as they halted for an instant to draw breath. "I forgot the hatch!"

Turning, he raced frantically back, fell, regained his footing and ran on.

In half an hour he rejoined them. "Too late," he announced briefly. "There's six feet of ocean over it by now. They were like rats in a trap."

Mendelbaum and Merrill looked conventionally grave.

Dale Carswell answered with a woman's ruthless logic. "I don't care. They deserved it—every one of them. That awful man they called the Master was like some dreadful spider, catching helpless, inoffensive people in his web, then torturing and killing them. The others were no better. It was an awful death they died, but if you only knew——"

"Baby, we know plenty," interrupted Carter as he took her hand to help her to the roadway.

THERE'S the tree where we met our Waterloo," he pointed to the big oak pollard standing by the highway. "I'm going to give it the once-over. I've got a hunch."

Up the bole he clambered, crept out on a limb that overhung the roadway, and began to shake it. "Heads up, here comes the phantom!" he announced. Dropping from the tree-branch, like a window-shade unfurled, came a sheet of thin metallic tissue, capable of folding to a compact cylinder, bright enough when hung across the road to reflect the headlights of a motorcar.

"Get it?" he asked as he rejoined them. "We saw our own reflection, thought we were going to have a collision, stopped, or ran off the road; then"—he made a pantomime of drawing a sack over his head—"next thing we knew we were nice, helpless little flies in the Spider-Man's web. They had their scouts posted near the road, of course, saw a likely-looking car approaching, dropped the

mirror-cloth, and—there you are. Dam' clever people, these crazy men."

"Crazy?" echoed Merrill with a smile. "I should say——"

"Don't say it, Prof., you'd only have to take it back," Carter chuckled. "The Master' was crazy as a fish out of water. I recognized him the moment I clapped eyes on him. He was Jacques LeGaie. You know, the feller who killed half a dozen people under the delusion he was Blue-beard reincarnated, escaped from Matteawan and tried to set up a kingdom of his own in Indo-China, and darn near got away with it—would have, too, if the French hadn't clapped him in the bug-house. He escaped from there, too, and disappeared. They say he had a couple of million dollars in gold coin cached away somewhere, and from the layout of that underground palace we just got out of, I shouldn't be surprized if he had. He was always fancying himself somebody's reincarnation, you know. His latest delusion must have been—what was his name, Professor?"

"The Sheik Al-Jebal," Merrill answered.

"Righto. Now get this: We don't tell anyone where we've been. If we do, we'll find ourselves inside some nice, comfortable padded cell, with visitors allowed Thursday and Sunday afternoons.

"Mendelbaum, you've had amnesia. You don't know where you've been or what you've been doing. If I ever hear of your telling about the Spider-Man and his underground kingdom—how'd you like to have me spill the story of how

you drank a pailful of scrub-water, and thanked the guy for ordering you to do it?"

"I wonder what time it is?" Dale Carswell asked.

"Can't say," responded Carter, "but my guess is it's early morning. We'll be in Brooklyn in time for breakfast at the St. George, if a car comes along—and my thumb holds out."

"YOU been to masquerade party, huh?" asked the Italian truck farmer who obligingly halted at the sign of Carter's upraised thumb and agreed to take them as far as Jamaica.

"Brother," Tom assured him solemnly, "you'd be surprized!"

THE fog lifted as they neared the city, and behind them came the faint glow of the rising sun.

"Oh, my dear," Dale leaned her head on Carter's shoulder, "after those dreadful days in that hell beneath the ground, you've no idea how good a little sun and air feels."

Carter drew her closer to him. "I've a five-thousand-dollar bonus coming for bringing Mendelbaum back alive," he told her, "and a vacation, too. They'll come in handy for our honeymoon, darlingest. We'll have the other, too."

"The other?" her eyes were bright with adoration as she lifted them questioningly to his.

"Precisely, belovedest, what you just said—a little son and heir."

