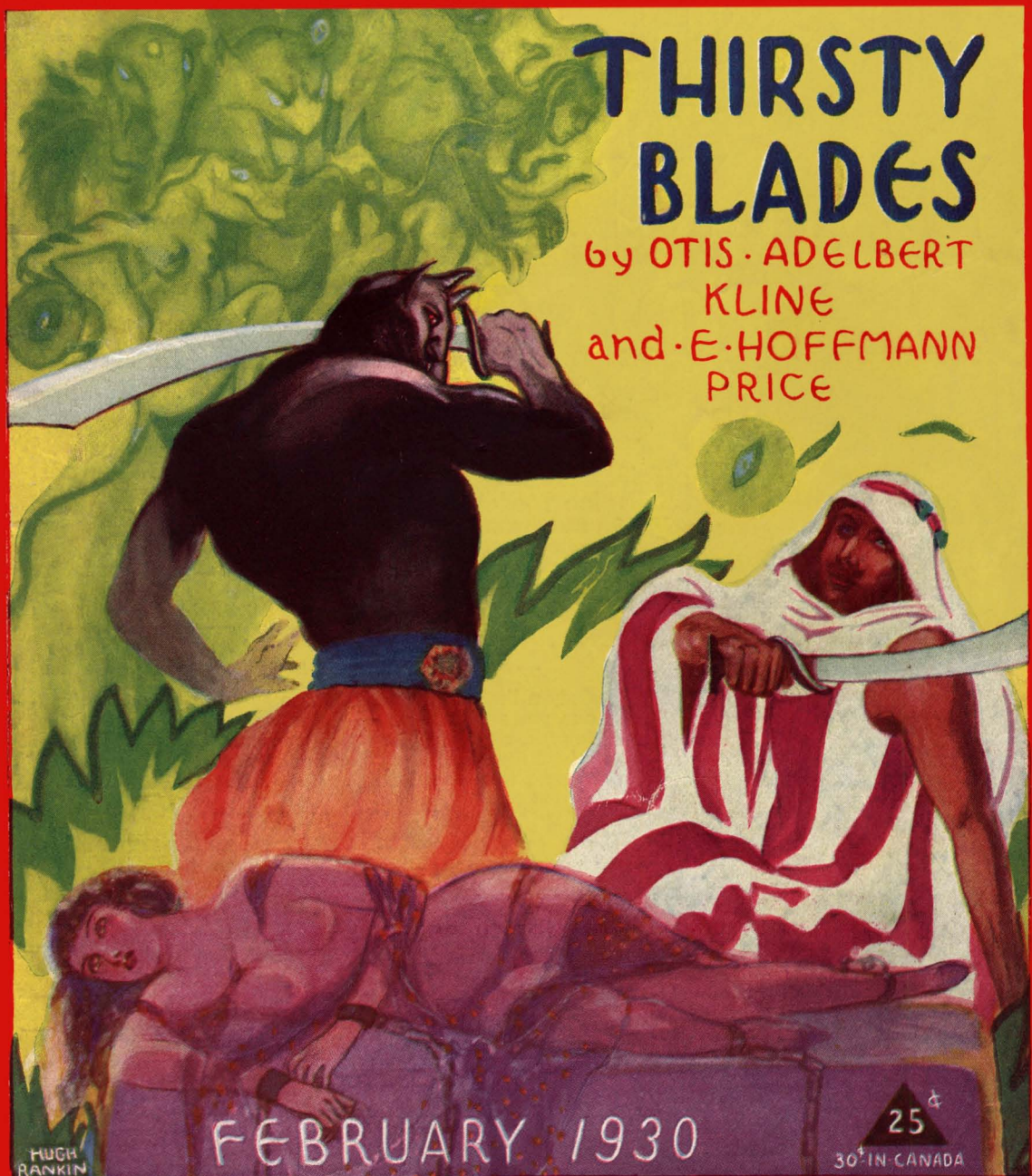


Weird Tales

The Unique Magazine

THIRSTY BLADES

by OTIS · ADELBERT
KLINE
and · E · HOFFMANN
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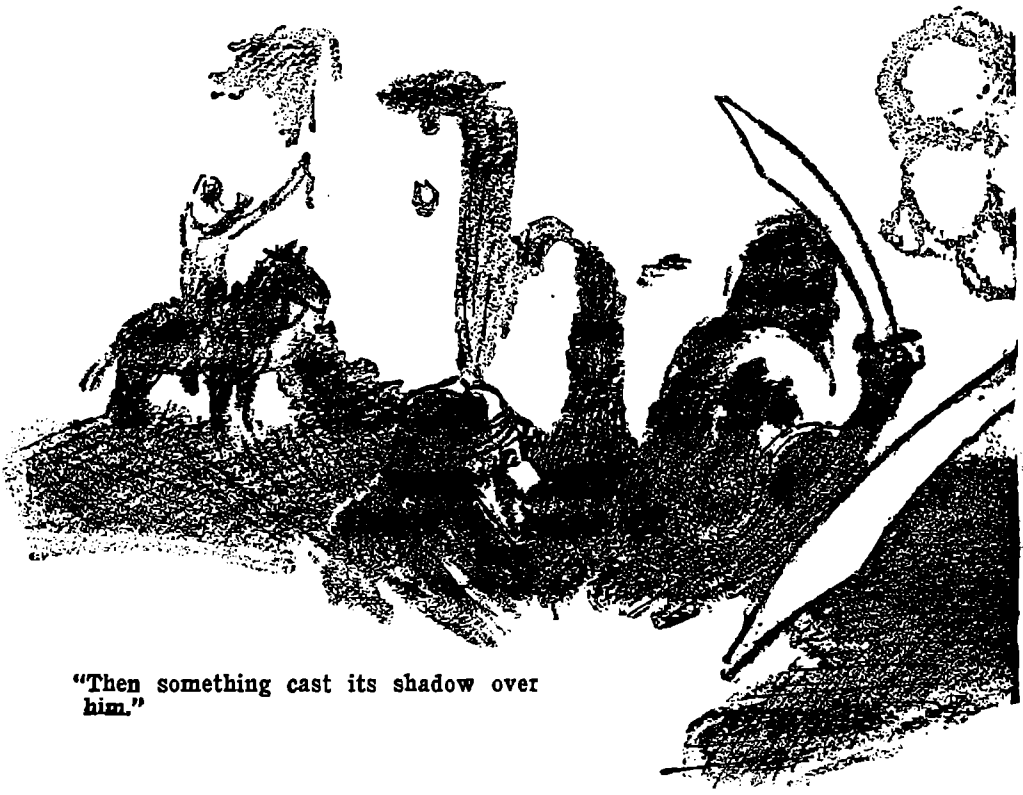
Contents for February, 1930

- Cover Design Hugh Rankin
Illustrating a scene in "Thirsty Blades"
- The Eyrie 148
A chat with the readers
- Shadows Clark Ashton Smith 154
Verse
- Thirsty Blades Otis A. Kline and E. Hoffmann Price 156
A swift-moving tale of the devil-worshippers of Kurdistan, and the colossal issues that hung upon the clash of blades
- The Comet-Drivers Edmond Hamilton 172
From the void of space it came, a cosmic vampire looting the lives of universes—a weird-scientific novelette

[CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE]

Thirsty

by OTIS·ADELBERT·KLINE
and E·HOFFMANN·PRICE



"Then something cast its shadow over him."

THE side entrance to the *caravanserai* was closed. Well then, back down the alley, and around the corner to the main gate. But when Rankin turned to retrace his steps, he saw that it might be a long way from there to any other place. For to his right and left were blank walls; at his back, a closed gate; and in front, a crescent of drawn blades was closing in on him. Behind the six advancing swords-

men rode their commander. He reined in his Barbary stallion, stroked his beard—henna red, as Rankin could see plainly in the white moonlight—and settled back to enjoy the spectacle.

"Click-click-click!" mocked the hammer of Rankin's .45 as it fell on a succession of empty chambers.

The red-bearded chief smiled. And Rankin knew that more than his own carelessness was responsible for the

Blades



unloading of that revolver. Someone had worked fast and skilfully as Rankin reclined in the *souk* that afternoon, smoking a *narghileh*, sipping bitter Abyssinian coffee, and pondering on how to extricate the lady Azizah from the peril that was descending from the mountains of Kurdistan.

Shoulder to shoulder the assailants advanced. Their steps were deliberate, now that they were certain rather than hopeful that the .45 had not been reloaded. Six lean swordsmen from the desert, grim phantoms whose curved blades gleamed frostily in the moonlight; curved simitars whose drawing cut shears from

shoulder to hip with one swift stroke.

Rankin drew his simitar, cursed the disguise that had forbidden his favorite saber, and came on guard. The six paused a moment in their advance. *One* of them, they knew, must close with their prey, while the other five hacked him to pieces. And the sentence of that *one* was written; for their victim's frenzy would not be tempered with any hope of escape. *One* of them was even now a dead man. . . .

One . . . two . . . three paces. . . .

Rankin dropped his point and laughed.

The line wavered. It takes courage to assault a madman.

A long, fierce lunge, and a deadly swift flicker of steel; and Rankin withdrew from the *mêlée*, on guard again. That sudden assault from beyond probable striking-distance had caught them off balance; *one* of them was even now a dead man, shorn half assunder.

Then they closed in. Rankin's footwork saved him, and during that instant of grace, his blade again hit deep as he evaded the charge.

"*Mashallah*!" gasped the red-bearded chief as he spurred his horse a pace forward.

There were only four to continue the attack, but their assault would be a reckless whirlwind of steel. No more sidestepping or retreating for Rankin.

"—hacked to pieces in some side street of Tekrit—" flashed through his mind. Ismeddin the Darvish was right.

And then he saw the chief draw his blade.

"Horse and foot! Christ, if I could only get *him*!" prayed Rankin.

Time had ceased. He remembered how very slowly a swift blade approaches when one is in the last extremity. He could parry, cut, retreat, parry again, cut—and then the chief on horse would cut him down. But there was plenty of time. . . .

Then something on the wall behind Rankin cast its shadow over him: attack from the rear.

"They are thorough in Tekrit!" flashed through his mind as the very end of that interminable instant came in an irresistibly flailing mill of blades.

Clack-clack-click! And a silent stroke that bit flesh. Clack-clack—

"Halt!" roared the chief from his Barbary horse.

His upraised blade swept down. In response to his signal, something soft and clinging dropped from the wall and enveloped Rankin. Snared in a net!

The three surviving footmen sheathed their blades, seized Rankin, now firmly enmeshed in the silken net, shouldered him, and followed their chief.

"Well," reflected Rankin, as he resigned himself to captivity, "if I'm hacked to pieces at all, it probably won't be in a side street. . . . I wonder if Ismeddin foresaw *this*?"

"And this only the 11th of Nisan . . . two more like this, and I'll be in good training for that black swordsman in the vault. . . .

"They expected me—just staring at that girl had nothing to do with it," Rankin assured himself by way of minimizing the folly of having stared too intently into the eyes of the veiled woman who had that afternoon appraised him from the height of her glittering litter.

But Rankin knew that there was a direct connection between the sanguinary combat of a few moments ago, and the exchange of glances between him and the veiled girl whose gorgeously adorned litter had followed the red-bearded dignitary through the *souk*. There was but one conclusion: the girl had called the redbear's attention to Rankin.

Well, and so be it then! For those were the eyes of Azizah who so often had accompanied Suleiman Baalshem in that haunting, recurring dream

that for twenty years had driven Rankin the length and breadth of Asia, and across all the lands of Islam. He was attaining his goal, even if only to meet the thirsty blades whereof Ismeddin had spoken.

The chief of his assailants, then, must be the Shareef, Sayyid Yussuf, the girl's uncle and guardian. In which case, all the better: at least Rankin was not in the hands of the devil-worshippers who had been filtering out of Kurdistan to celebrate their dreadful *sabbat* in that ravine two days' ride from Tekrit . . . and thus and thus Rankin speculated . . . with never a passer-by to intrude on the unreality of it all.

THE chief at last drew up before a massive, iron-studded gate that was firmly hinged to the heavy masonry jamb and wall. He thumped the brazen lock-plate with the pommel of his simitar. The door opened without a challenge from the porter within. The rebeard dismounted and signaled his men-at-arms to release Rankin from his silken web.

At the end of a long, narrow passage, they turned into a courtyard where fountains sprayed mistily in the moonlight. Rankin's captors released their grip on his arms; and one of them presented Rankin's simitar, hilt foremost.

Rankin accepted the blade and glanced sharply about him. More combat?

The chief smiled. "You are among friends, Saidi Rankin."

"Your playmates didn't look so friendly," retorted Rankin.

"I am Absál, the son of our lord the Shareef," continued the rebeard, "and my six playmates were only to assure me of your identity. There are others on the same mission that leads you to Tekrit. Anyway, before I could signal Silat up there on the wall with his net, three of my men were out of action."

"One should," agreed Rankin, "al-

ways be sure of a stranger's identity. But what if they had cut me into many small pieces?"

Absál shrugged. "*Wallah!* That would have been deplorable, of course. But it would have proved to my entire satisfaction that you are not the man for the venture I have in mind. As it is——"

"As it is, saidi," interrupted Rankin, "you think that perhaps I may be fit to meet the Black Presence in the vault on the night of the 14th of Nisan?"

"*Inshallah!*" evaded Absál. "If it please God. And our lord the Shareef has a good deal to say about that."

A gong clanged. The heavy drapes that masked the horseshoe arch in the left wall of the courtyard parted, revealing a long, narrow room at whose farther end was a dais on which sat a white-bearded, hook-nosed man: Absál's father, the Shareef.

They paused in the archway to bow, and offer the peace.

"*Wa'salaam aleikum!*" responded the Shareef. And then, after scrutinizing Rankin with his hard, piercing eyes: "So this is the stout swordsman of the tradition?"

"Even so, father," replied Absál.

The old man twice clapped his hands. There was a rustling behind the curtains at the Shareef's right, and the tinkle of anklets. The curtains parted slightly, and Rankin again looked into the smoldering, Saracenic eyes of the veiled lady of the market-place.

"Is this the man?" queried the Shareef, half turning to catch the eye of the girl in the doorway.

"This is indeed the man, uncle."

"Very well," he acknowledged. And then, to Rankin: "If you are the man, what is your hidden name?"

"Abdemon."

"Again, very well," agreed the Shareef. "Now tell me, Abdemon, how it was that Suleiman Baalshem could not keep his promise to you; and why, through all these dusty centuries, the

word of Suleiman has been in the power of Shaitan the Damned."

"A neighboring king," began Rankin, "proposed a riddle that Suleiman could not solve. Therefore he swore by his beard that if I, Abdemon, a captain of his guard, would solve the riddle, he would give me his daughter, who was the granddaughter of the sultan of Egypt. Suleiman, the Lord of the Name, swore by his beard and by his right hand, but he failed to add, '*Inshallah!* If it so please God.' And Allah punished Suleiman for his impiety by giving Iblis, prince of djinn, full power over the promise of Suleiman for a whole day. And during that day of power, Iblis abducted my bride-to-be, so that Suleiman could not keep the oath he had sworn. Yet in the end Allah relented, and granted that after the march of centuries Suleiman would finally be able to keep his promise: provided that Abdemon in one of his incarnations would meet Iblis, sword to sword, and defeat him. And thus, bound by my oath to Suleiman, and bound by my love for this girl who was almost mine, I have marched across the centuries, from one failure to another, to meet Iblis, the Dark Presence, in the vault, on the night of the 14th of Nisan: the first full moon of spring.

"In those days they called her Neferte, but now she is called Azizah," continued Rankin. "And on nights of the full moon she lies as one dead; her heartbeat is stopped, and her breath is imperceptible."

"Well said," agreed the Shareef. "Now for the final proof: give me the seal."

"What seal?" countered Rankin.

"The leaden seal from the shattered urn."

Rankin started at this glib mention of the seal his father had given him nearly twenty years ago, and wondered how the Shareef could know of the incident.

"That I can not do," declared Rankin. "It is the leaden impression of

the seal of Suleiman Baalshem, who commanded that no hands other than my own should touch it."

The old man nodded and smiled.

"I was aware also of that. So hold it in your own hands that I may examine it."

Rankin produced a small leather bag suspended from a chain passed around his neck. Opening the bag, he took therefrom a small disk of lead, and held it up for the Shareef to examine.

The Shareef and his son bowed low.

"*Bismillahi rahmani raheem!*" they exclaimed. "Praise to God, Lord of the Worlds! It is truly the seal of Suleiman Baalshem."

"But tell me," continued the Shareef, "who told you that you would find your destiny in Tekrit?"

"Ismeddin the Darvish interpreted the dreams which have haunted me since I was a boy, and told me how I could release your brother's daughter from the blackness that clouds her senses on nights of the full moon, when the power of Iblis the Damned is at its height," replied Rankin.

The Shareef frowned at the mention of Ismeddin.

"So that old ruffian and heretic sent you to Tekrit? Did he by any chance speak of the dooms that overtake meddlers who roam about here in search of adventure?"

"At great length, *saidi*," responded Rankin, "even as he explained that due to various misunderstandings you two have had regarding some horses, he could scarcely appear in person to present me to you. But I came, nevertheless. Is it not written," quoted Rankin, "*There is no shield to turn aside the spear cast of Destiny: gold, glory, silver, each avail not?*"

"Spoken like a true believer," agreed the Shareef. And then, sharply, "Testify!"

"*La illaha illa Allah*—" began Rankin, and paused.

The sequence was familiar as his own name, but Rankin was not truly

a Moslem, and one can not testify falsely when the word of Suleiman and its fulfilment lie in one's hands.

"*Wa Muhammad er-rasul allahi!*" recited the red-bearded chief. "I have testified in his place. And let us consider that this infidel has testified that Muhammad is the prophet of God as well as that there is no God but Allah. For if he can wear the seal of Suleiman Baalshem without harm, it makes little difference what he testifies. For Allah is wise, all-knowing," concluded Sayyid Absal sonorously.

"There is something in what you say," conceded the Shareef. "Still, am I to entrust the welfare of my brother's daughter to the hands of an infidel? And an infidel sent by that bandit of an Ismeddin!"

"But," protested the rebeard, "didn't he prove himself? He is the stout swordsman of the tradition, Abdemon whose skill was the delight of Suleiman, ages ago, and whose sword must give the word of Suleiman its only chance of fulfilment. And he has the seal——"

"Mummeries to fool true believers!" growled the Shareef. "Tonight is but the 11th of Nisan. I will look into this fellow's story, and on the 12th I will either let him carry out his plan, or else——"

The old man nodded significantly at the stalwart African at his left, who was toying with the hilt of a ponderous two-handed sword.

The Shareef clapped his hands. "Show this unbeliever every consideration," he directed, as two slaves approached at his signal. "But on your lives, keep him locked up."

"The swords," thought Rankin, as his escort led him to a cell, "may quench their thirst unless Ismeddin is closer than he seems."

Just before he passed out of earshot, he caught the faint tinkle of anklets, but he dared not turn back for even a glance at Azizah, who once had almost been his.

ZANTUT, servant of Iblis and high priest of the devil-worshippers who had come down from the mountains of Kurdistan, sat in an upper room of the *caravanserai* just across the street from that selected by Rankin the day before. Two lamps flared ruddily at each side of the Master, casting a flickering light on the parchment scroll he studied. Zantut muttered to himself as he spelled out, line by line, the fine, intricate characters of the manuscript.

At times he would raise his eyes from his work, glance sharply to either side, and at the door of the room, which he was facing. At last he addressed the adept who squatted, cross-legged, in a shadowy corner where he fed grains of sandalwood to a censer that fumed before the silver image of a peacock.

"Humayd, what time is it?"

"Well past midnight, *saidi*. The sentries have been changed three times since sunset."

"And still no report!" muttered Zantut as he stroked his black beard. Then, to Humayd: "Sound recall."

The adept drew from behind the pedestal of the silver peacock a small drum, carefully tuned it, and with knuckles and the heel of his hand beat a curious, broken rhythm. The drum emitted a surprizing volume of sound for its size; yet so low-pitched was its hollow chug-chug-thump that it barely disturbed the silence of that late hour.

Scarcely had Humayd set aside the drum when there came at the door a tapping that mimicked the cadence of the recall.

"Enter!" commanded Zantut. And then, recognizing the newcomer, "What luck, Saoud?"

"Less than none, *saidi*. I waited at the entrance of the *caravanserai* across the street until my legs were knotted with cramps. And this"——he flashed from beneath his *djellab* a keen, curved blade——"is all too clean."

Zantut scrutinized him gravely.

"You slept!" snapped the Master.

"Not in that corner of perdition, *saidi*. And I reported while that drum was still warm."

"Granted!" admitted Zantut.

And then came another sequence of taps at the door.

"Enter and report!" commanded Zantut.

"Weariness and waste of time, *saidi*," announced the latest arrival. "As you ordered, I had a word with the guards posted at the city gates. My purse is somewhat lighter, but to no purpose."

And the purport of each of the succeeding scouts was similar. Rankin had evaded them all. Then, after an interval, came the last scout.

"I saw a man on horse, followed by three on foot, *saidi*," he began. "They carried a burden that might very well have been a man. The horseman halted at the house of the Shareef Yussuf, where he and his followers entered."

"Ah! . . . could it have been the Shareef's son, Absál?"

"It could. He had a red beard, and was very tall and lean."

"Sayyid Absál himself! Then what, Ismail?"

"Someone of the party had been wounded. I followed blood splashes on the paving until I came to a side street close to the *caravanserai* of this madman we are seeking. In a blind street I saw three men lying where they had fallen. They had no further use for the swords they still clutched. But before I could investigate, a party of armed men approached to pick up the dead."

"Then what?" demanded Zantut.

"I gathered from their remarks that an additional corpse would be easily enough handled. And I didn't wish to arouse suspicion by loitering."

"Very good, Ismail," replied Zantut. "It seems that our enemy is in good hands: either dead or imprisoned. That saves us considerable an-

noyance. Being strangers, we could not handle an assassination as safely or effectively as the son of our Lord the Shareef."

"But why," queried one of the adepts, "should Sayyid Absál have killed or captured this madman, Rankin?"

"Iblis alone can say. Power and praise to Thousand-Eyed Malik Taûs!"

"Praise and power to him!" intoned the assembled adepts in unison as they made with their left hands a curious fleeting gesture.

"It may be," continued Zantut, "that the Shareef or Sayyid Absál doubted that Rankin is indeed the Elect, the reincarnated Abdemon who alone can thwart Iblis on the 14th of Nisan. Which is all the better; for then one of us can very easily approach the Shareef claiming to be the Elect, get possession of the lady Azizah on the pretext of breaking the spell that clouds her senses on nights of the full moon, and then seek the hidden vault. But it is late. Humayd, stand guard while we sleep."

Humayd took his post, simitar in hand.

Zantut set aside his scrolls and stretched out on his divan. The adepts extinguished the flaring lamps and lay down on the thick rug at the foot of the Master's couch.

"WELL," thought Rankin, as he surveyed his cell by the light of the jailer's torch as the barred door clanged shut, "I've been in worse holes than this."

Odors were present, and vermin also; but by no means as plentiful or as unbearable as, for instance, they had been in the dungeons of the Emir's palace in Boukhara. And the air was almost fresh. In the course of a few years of adventure, one at times sleeps on a worse bed than the stone bench that ran along the wall of the cell.

"And Ismeddin," reflected Rankin, "is doubtless on the job. All the worse for Iblis and his friends!"

The very absence of any sign of Ismeddin seemed to Rankin to be certain proof that the wily old darvish was busily at work against the followers of Iblis, who was worshiped in Kurdistan as Malik Taûs, the Lord Peacock. Rankin had heard tales the length and breadth of Kurdistan, telling of the outrageous feats and resourcefulness of that unusual hermit who divided his time between the walls of his cavern and the palaces of princes: that is, when not engaged in the single-handed looting of caravans.

Then, like any seasoned campaigner, Rankin sought and found the soft spots of the stone bench, and stretched out for as much sleep as the night afforded. But that sleep was to have its interruption.

A pebble clicked against the wall at Rankin's side; and then another.

"Ismeddin, by God!" was Rankin's first thought as he raised himself on his elbow and looked up at the tiny, barred window through which filtered the moon's dazzling whiteness.

Then, lest a repetition of the signal attract the attention of the sentry posted somewhere in the hall leading to the door of the cell, Rankin intoned the sonorous first lines of the Sura of the Brightness, as any piously inclined prisoner might do in resigning himself to captivity:

"By the noonday brightness, and by the night when it darkeneth!

Thy Lord hath not forsaken thee, neither hath he been displeased."

The pebbles ceased.

But the hand thrust in between the bars of the window was certainly not the grimy talon of Ismeddin. The slender white fingers released a scrap of paper that fluttered a moment in the moonlight, then, passing out of the beam, settled to the floor where in the

darkness Rankin could just distinguish it.

"*Truly the future shall be better for thee than the Past,*" concluded Rankin. "*And thy Lord shall be gracious, and thou satisfied.*"

The jeweled fingers gestured ever so slightly, paused a moment, and disappeared.

Rankin curbed his impatience and contented himself with staring at the scarcely perceptible blotch that was the note from his unknown friend.

Very faintly from the hall came the snore of the sentry.

"My devoutness was wasted," thought Rankin, as he arose to get the note. "Still, a bit of piety is never out of order."

Rankin struck a match. One sufficed, for the note was brief:

Bismillahi! Neferte to Abdemon, greeting! The darvish, Ismeddin, will spring the bars of your cell and release you on the night of the 12th of Nisan. Ride and overtake us at the oasis of al Akra.

The night of the twelfth . . . two days of hard riding . . . well, that would not be so bad . . . so let Ismeddin do the worrying for the next few hours. . . .

ON THE evening of the 12th, the porter admitted seven darvishes seeking audience of the Shareef shortly before the sunset prayer.

"Prayer and the Peace upon you, Cousin of the Prophet," saluted Zantut as he bowed low before the white-bearded Shareef. "My companions and I have ridden day and night from the north of Kurdistan in our haste to fulfil an ancient prophecy. It is written——"

Zantut paused and turned to the adept at his left: "Humayd, tell the Cousin of the Prophet, our Lord the Shareef, of your vision."

"Three nights ago," began Humayd, after receiving the Shareef's permission to speak, "I was sitting in

contemplation of holy things, when suddenly a great light appeared in my cave. A tall stranger whose face and garments shone like the noonday sun stood there before me.

“‘Rise at once, Abdemon,’ he said, ‘and with your pious companions seek the house of the Shareef, Sayyid Yussuf—’

“‘A thousand pardons,’ I replied, ‘but I am Humayd, a darvish, and not Abdemon.’

“‘You are wrong,’ said the glittering stranger; ‘not Humayd, but Abdemon, who in a former life were favored by our lord, Suleiman Baalshem, who promised you his daughter, Neferte. But that promise, as you know, Suleiman could not keep, on account of Allah’s wrath at his impiety. But Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate, has relented; and on the 14th of Nisan, the first full moon of spring, you must take Neferte, who in this life is the lady Azizah, the niece of our lord the Shareef, to the Valley of Djinn, and there perform the ritual which will lift the curse from her life. And then Suleiman’s promise to you in an earlier life can be fulfilled. Finally, there is a great treasure which Suleiman left awaiting this day; one third of it is yours, and the rest is for the pious Shareef.’

“Then there came an intolerable brightness which blinded me; and when I could again see, the Presence had vanished. I sought my instructor the holy Zantut; and behold, we are here,” concluded Humayd.

“So there is also a treasure?” queried the Shareef.

“Even so, *saidi*. Just as Humayd has said.”

“What of the seal?” asked the Shareef.

Humayd drew from a small pouch suspended at his throat a leaden seal.

“The seal of Suleiman Baalshem,” admitted the Shareef. “And then, *Ishtitad!*” he commanded. “Testify!”

“*La illaha illa allah,*” intoned Humayd. “*Wa Muhammad er-rasul al-lahi.*”

“At least we have a true believer this time,” reflected the Shareef. Then, to his son: “Was I not right in imprisoning the infidel you brought before me?”

“Not entirely,” protested Sayyid Absál. “The *kaffir* is a great swordsman, even as the prophecy said. And one of these men is a liar, for one of the leaden seals must be false.”

“My lord,” interposed Zantut, “is it not more likely that a true believer should have the seal of Suleiman Baalshem than an unbeliever?”

“That goes without saying,” agreed the Shareef.

“But,” protested Sayyid Absál, “who are we to know what is acceptable to Allah, and to whom he would entrust the seal of Suleiman? Is this fellow Humayd a fighting man? Let him meet my six best retainers in a side street,” challenged Sayyid Absál, “and if he can prove himself in that way, I will agree.”

“Son,” reproved the Shareef, “it seems to me that you have no more to agree than to disagree.”

“Well,” retorted Sayyid Absál, “and has this pious Zantut by any chance dazzled you with his tale of great treasure? The tradition speaks of the promise of Suleiman, and the health of our cousin, Azizah, and not of chests of treasure.”

“My lord,” interrupted Zantut, “is it not also possible that this infidel impostor said nothing about the treasure so that he could keep it all for himself?”

“Even so,” assented the Shareef.

“Now by Allah and by my beard!” thundered Sayyid Absál. “The issue is evaded! What of the stout swordsman of the tradition?”

“Humayd,” replied Zantut, “is a great swordsman, even if he has not distinguished himself in street brawling in Tekrit.”

"Then if he is such a swordsman, let him meet this *kaffir* in single combat, and may Allah judge between them!" demanded Sayyid Absál.

"That," conceded the Shareef, "would be fair."

Humayd's confusion did not escape Sayyid Absál. But the triumph was fleeting.

"My lord," protested Zantut, "need we put a revelation from Allah to the trial of combat? Would that be an auspicious beginning, making the favored of Allah prove himself against an infidel?"

"Assuredly not," agreed the Shareef.

"Allah, and again, by Allah!" stormed Sayyid Absál. "My uncle's daughter identified this unbeliever as the stout swordsman of her visions. Let her at least identify this holy darvish."

"That also would be well," admitted Zantut. "But my lord knows as well as I do what value to set on the fancy of a woman. She saw him sitting in the *souk*, smoking, and he pleased her. Is that to be taken against the revelations of an angel to a devout and holy man?"

Zantut paused, stroked his beard, and continued: "Cousin of the Prophet, I am a peacemaker. I would not for the very treasure of Suleiman cause contention between you and your son. My disciple may have been deceived; or what he saw might have been a snare of Iblis. And lest injustice be done, let this *kaffir* accompany us; and if Humayd fails in the ritual, then let the *kaffir* prove himself. Thus we will have twice the chance of dissolving the curse that clouds the life of your brother's daughter."

"Done, by Allah and by my beard!" exclaimed the Shareef. "Wise and holy man, none but Suleiman himself has equal wisdom."

The Shareef twice clapped his hands.

"Fresh camels for Zantut and his

followers," he commanded. "A litter for the lady Azizah. Then get the infidel swordsman, well bound, and put him in a litter."

With a lordly gesture, the Shareef dismissed Zantut and his companions.

AN HOUR after sunset, ten swift *meharis* filed past the sentries at the Isfayan Gate. Two of them bore between them a richly adorned *takht rawan*; and a third carried a litter of ordinary design. The other seven camels were ridden by the darvishes who but a short while before had been dismissed by the Shareef.

A one-eyed hunch-backed beggar squatted at the gate, whining to Allah and all passers-by for alms.

"The Lord will provide," growled Zantut from the height of his *mehari*.

"Son of a flat-nosed mother," muttered the beggar as he adjusted the patch over his right eye, "you would be amazed if you knew what the Lord will provide for you!"

He stroked his long beard, and grinned evilly.

"Alms, in the name of Allah, alms!" he whined, the stout savagery of his expression changing swiftly to one more in keeping with his position as he noted the approach of a tall slave in a striped *kaftán*.

The slave tossed him a coin, glanced quickly about him, then stooped and muttered in the mendicant's ear.

"What's this?" demanded the beggar. "Released? How, and by whom?"

"My lord the Shareef ordered it. Both the infidel and the lady Azizah left just a short while ago."

"Left?"

"Yes. With the darvish Zantut and his pious companions."

"Father of seven hundred pigs!" stormed the beggar. "Son of calamity! Where is the Shareef?"

"In his reception hall, *saidi*," replied the slave respectfully.

"Alms, for the love of Allah!" whined the beggar for the benefit of

a passer-by. And then to the slave, in an undertone: "Very well, Musa. I shall remember this."

And with a surprisingly jaunty gait, the hunchback strode down the main street of Tekrit, and then, turning down a side alley, bore directly toward the great house of the Shareef. But instead of waiting to be announced, the beggar thrust the porter aside, stalked down the hall, across the courtyard, and into the Shareef's presence.

"Old man," demanded the Shareef, "who admitted you?"

"I admitted myself, *saidi*," replied the beggar. "And as soon as your men withdraw," he continued, indicating the porter and two slaves who were advancing to seize him, "I will say more."

The Shareef gasped, turned the color of an old saddle; then, meeting for a moment the grimy wanderer's fierce eye, relented. The man was obviously mad, reflected the Shareef; some saint or holy man whose wits were in Allah's keeping.

"I will see him, Kasim," he said, dismissing with a gesture the astonished porter and his companions.

"Now, old man, what is it?"

"Prayer, and the Peace, Cousin of the Prophet!" began the hunchback, "I have come to make a wager."

"And what would you wager, holy man?"

The Shareef was now quite convinced, from the intruder's wild manner, unkempt beard, and one glittering eye, that this was indeed a wandering saint.

"My head against your two best horses, *saidi*. Have them saddled, *saidi*, and when we are well beyond the city walls, I will propose the wager."

"By Allah," muttered the Shareef, "but he is mad!"

"My lord," resumed the beggar, "I am unarmed, and an old man. I repeat

my wager: my head against two good horses."

"So be it," agreed the Shareef, as he clapped his hands. "Horses and arms at once, Kasim!"

"Allah upon you, my lord, but you wish to win this very good head of mine?"

"Holy stranger," replied the Shareef, "leave your prayer with this house; and if you lose your wager, you may keep your head."

"Of what use are my prayers, *saidi*, seeing that the servant of Satan the Damned this very day beguiled you? Where is the daughter of your brother, on whom be peace?"

"On the way to the Valley of Djinn, with Zantut the darvish and his pious companions."

"And what of the infidel, Rankin?" next demanded the beggar.

"The *kaffir* rides with them. But who are you, reverend saint?" wondered the Shareef; for there was something strangely familiar about this madman.

"I am as much a saint as Zantut is a darvish. It is you who are stark mad, and not I," declared the beggar.

"Even so," agreed the Shareef. "But what do you mean?"

"Wait until we are well without the city walls, and in the desert which has seen all things. Wait until we have seen what we are to see——"

Kasim entered and bowed to the Shareef.

"In readiness, *saidi*," he announced.

The beggar followed the Shareef to the main entrance, where a groom with two mares, saddled and richly caparisoned, awaited them.

"*Wallah!*" ejaculated the beggar, "but my lord wagers heavily against one cracked head. Each a Saklawiyah-Jidraniyah——"

He bowed low as he pronounced the race and strain of the matchless beasts; and then, "To horse, *saidi!*"

"You are strangely familiar with noble horses," observed the Shareef.

The grimy hunchback smiled crookedly.

"To the Isfayan Gate, *saidi*," he suggested, as the Shareef took the lead.

At the gate the sentries challenged them, but recognizing Sayyid Yussuf, permitted them to pass.

The beggar muttered a few words to the sentry.

"I have kept it safely, *saidi*," replied the sentry, as he unbuckled from his waist a belt and simitar which he handed the beggar.

"I ride unarmed. Sayyid Yussuf, be kind enough to carry my sword."

"Allah, and again, by Allah!" marvelled the Shareef as he accepted the blade, and noted the sentry's respectful address. "Saint or beggar, or both . . . but who are you, old man?"

"You would be amazed, my lord," was the evasive reply. "Ride on yet a way. Let me lead."

This time the Shareef followed in the wanderer's trace. And as he rode, he fingered the hilt of the beggar's simitar, and wondered at the cool, unblinking sapphires that adorned the pommel, and the cunning workmanship of the embroidered belt.

"LET us halt here, *saidi*," requested the beggar after half an hour's brisk ride.

They dismounted beside a low, half-crumbled, white-washed cupola that loomed spectrally in the moonlight: the ruined tomb of a forgotten saint. They made their salaam to the unknown occupant of the holy place.

"For a beggar," began the Shareef, "you are armed like a prince. And I wonder whether you are mad as you pretend to be."

"And for a cousin of the Prophet," replied the beggar, "I wonder if you are as wise as you ought to be."

The moon was masked by a thin

wisp of cloud. A cool, chilling breeze crept across the desert.

"Kneel here, three paces before me, *saidi*," murmured the beggar. "Kneel facing me, with this ghost of a wind at your left . . . and let this ghost of a moon bear witness to the truth that lies hidden in these sands . . . Let it bear witness to my wager: my head against those two *asil* mares. . . . With my own sword strike off my head, *saidi*," crooned the beggar, "if what you see be not the truth as Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate, sees it . . . and the truth, my lord, is that Iblis the Damned has beguiled you. . . ."

"Look, *saidi*," chanted the beggar, as he gathered handfuls of sand and let it trickle between his fingers. "Look at this sand which is the dust of unremembered kings and the dust of forgotten slaves . . . look at this sand over which kings and slaves have marched, endless procession, ages without end. . . ."

The beggar's gesture of scooping sand lengthened until his hands swept in an arc from the ground to the full extent of his arm. The cool breeze caught the fine dust, blowing it into little clouds that whisked and whirled uncannily.

"And that moon, *saidi*, that pale moon who hides her face behind a veil, *saidi* . . . let her bear witness, for she has seen all things and knows all things. . . ."

As the beggar chanted, the breeze centered in a vortex between him and the Shareef.

"Look closely, *saidi* . . . these sands bear witness, and this dust bears witness . . . and this moon also, who knows all things. . . ."

Faster and yet faster the old man flung sand before him; yet slower and still more slowly he chanted in murmuring monotone, like the maddening pulse of a necromancer's drum.

Sayyid Yussuf stared fixedly into the veil of ever moving, ever present,

living dust . . . for the dust lived, and danced in tiny figures before him. . . . He shuddered. . . .

"And now you see that which there is to see," chanted the beggar. "Now you see the peril into which you sent Azizah . . . they file into the black pit of the Lord of the Black Hands . . . and Abdemon whom you denied is bound, and can not save her . . . it is written in this dust, *saidi* . . . it is written on these sands . . . and this moon bears witness, this moon who knows all that is to be . . . for that which is to be is one with that which has been, O cousin of the Prophet. . . ."

The beggar abruptly ceased chanting, and clapped his hands sharply.

"*Wallah!*" gasped the Shareef, blinking. "By my beard!"

He trembled violently at that which had left the beggar's swiftly weaving hands to dance in the tiny whirlwinds before him.

"That sign with the left hand, old man——"

"Just as I said. But it has not yet happened——"

"Not yet?"

The Shareef vaulted to the saddle.

"No. But wait a moment. We have time. Your horses are fast."

The beggar drew from somewhere in the ragged folds of his dirty *djellab* a slender tube the length of his forearm.

"Strike light, *saidi!*" he commanded.

The Shareef fumbled with flint and steel.

"The fire of your pistol will do!" snapped the beggar. The Shareef fired. Then the sputtering of a fuse, and a shower of sparks, and three red stars hung high above them, flamed ruddily for half a minute, and vanished.

"The *Feringhi* troops used them to signal," explained the beggar. "I stole a box of them at Beirut."

"Ah!" And the Shareef frowned.

"Old man, whom are you signaling? On your head——"

He leveled his pistol.

"Peace upon you, my lord," grinned the beggar. "I am signaling a detachment of the guard to follow us as fast as their horses can travel."

"You, signal the guard? Now, by Allah, but this is too much! Who are you?" demanded the Shareef.

The beggar readjusted his turban; reached with his right hand into his *djellab* and over his left shoulder, dragging forth a large leather pouch; jerked the patch from his right eye; stretched himself, clutching skyward with his grimy talons; and then stood before the astonished Shareef, straight as a lance, fierce-eyed as a bird of prey.

"I am Ismeddin! Whose head you swore you would have. As it is, I keep my head, and, *inshallah*, those two *asil* mares," exulted the darvish.

"By Allah and by Abaddon!" gasped Sayyid Yussuf. "Old thief, you dared venture into Tekrit at the risk of your head?"

"Even so, my lord. For the promise of Suleiman has waited all these centuries for fulfilment. And the infidel Rankin, who was once Abdemon, could not have accomplished his mission single-handed. But now, to horse! Those sons of Iblis the Damned are mounted on your swiftest *meharis*."

The Shareef snorted.

"Follow me!"

Their mounts stretched out in an extended gallop.

"*Wallah!*" exulted Ismeddin, as he drew up beside the Shareef's mare. "She flies! And to think that I overlooked her when I raided your camp at Deir el Zor . . . had your men but snored a moment longer . . . but give me my sword, *saidi* . . . we have hot work ahead of us. . . ."

Ismeddin leaned forward in the saddle, caught the simitar the Shareef tossed him, and buckled the belt about his waist.

BIBAN UL DJINNI they called that desolate, narrow valley: the Valley of the Djinn. But these bearded strangers out of northern Kurdistan eagerly sought that avoided citadel where their dark monarch sat dreaming of ancient days before Suleiman learned the Word of Power; for this was the eve of the 14th of Nisan, when they could make secure for their lord forever after the triumph of that one day wherein he held absolute power over the word of Suleiman.

Ten *meharis* filed down an avenue dimly outlined by the stumps of shattered columns. They picked their way slowly, for the full moon had not yet risen to illuminate the desolation. Finally, at the end of the avenue, they halted. The seven *soi-disant* darvishes dismounted and gathered about the kneeling *meharis* that bore the rich *tahkt rawan*. Zantut parted the curtains and by the light of a torch looked in.

"As I expected," he announced, "she is in a trance. Ibrahim, stand guard," he commanded. "And keep an eye on the infidel, Rankin. The rest of you, follow me."

Zantut, followed by his adepts, turned toward the black-tiled circular court at the extremity of the avenue up which they had ridden.

"Look, master! There it is, just as it was written!" exclaimed one of the adepts as he pointed out to Zantut a copper image that gleamed dully on its basalt pedestal.

"There is where Iblis sits dreaming of those broad, rich days before Suleiman—may wild hogs defile his grave!—learned the Word of Power. Stand by, brethren!" commanded Zantut.

They formed in a crescent before the image.

Zantut advanced, bearing in each hand a torch which he planted at either side of the image. Then, taking from his belt a small copper mallet, he tapped the image in various spots,

each tap sounding a different note; and as he tapped, he listened carefully. Over and over he tapped, here and there; then finally announced, "The third arm; the second hand; the fourth head."

Three stepped forward, each grasping one of the members named by Zantut.

"Ready?" demanded Zantut.

"Ready, master," they replied.

"Now!" exclaimed the master.

And as each adept twisted the member he grasped, the copper image, pedestal and all, swung noiselessly aside.

"Follow me!" directed Zantut.

The dark-robed devotees of Iblis, torch in hand, filed after the master, stepping in unison down the smooth, black stairs.

"The Sura of the Darkness!" commanded Zantut. "One . . . Two . . . Three!"

In deep, resonant tones they chanted as they advanced into the abysmal blacknesses of the vault, swaying their torches in cadence:

"Lord of many brazen hells,
Lord of the Painted Fan,
Prince of the Outer Marches,
Prince of the Borderland,
Iblis, 'tis Thee that we adore,
Just and logical God!"

Flight after flight they marched, chanting as they descended into the depths, until finally, arriving at the foot of the winding stairs, they halted at the entrance of a great hall whose floor was paved with tiles of lapis lazuli.

The master halted and lifted his left arm. His followers ceased chanting and, following Zantut's example, removed their shoes before entering the sanctuary of Iblis.

"Lord and Master," intoned Zantut as he made a swift gesture with his left hand, "we Thy faithful servants bring Thee reverence and worship."

Then, with heads bowed and arms crossed, Zantut and his followers ad-

vanced across the blue tiles toward the Presence that sat cross-legged on a lofty dais at the farther end of the hall. When within five paces of the dais, all except Zantut halted, and kneeling, formed a semicircle.

Zantut advanced to the first step, knelt, and carefully scrutinized the approach to the high place. With his finger tips he caressed the polished stones.

"The holy place has not been defiled," he announced. "The dust of the weary centuries has not been disturbed. The Master sits dreaming of the Night of Power; and his sleep has not been broken."

Then, raising his head and lifting up his arms, Zantut gazed full at the Presence.

"Hail, Iblis, Lord of the Outer Darkness, Malik Taûs, Prince of the Painted Fan!" he saluted, and bowed his head once more to the paving.

"Servants of Iblis," he announced, "you may lift up your eyes and gaze at your Prince."

They contemplated their Prince, stared in wonder at the onyx blackness of his lean, aquiline features: the predatory nose and hard mouth of one whose iron soul has experienced everything save submission. But the eyes were sightless and blank.

"He breathes," murmured an adept.

"That is but the final trace of life the conqueror could not quite extinguish," explained Zantut. "And it is that trace which we must fan into full flame tonight. At each former meeting, Abdemon has failed; and this is his last chance. And we know best what this last chance is worth!

"Talaat! Saoud! Ismail! Go up and get the girl, and Abdemon also. And tell Ibrahim that when the comrades from Azerbaijan arrive, they are to descend at once. The hour is close at hand."

"Harkening and obedience, *saidi*," replied Talaat, bowing first to the

Dark Presence on the throne, and then to Zantut.

From the dim shadows of the hall, Zantut and the two remaining adepts dragged forth a great block of chiseled porphyry, which they slid readily enough across the polished tiles to a position exactly in front of the throne. Zantut then plucked from five of the tiles the pentagonal silver plates with which they were inlaid, uncovering orifices that led to unplumbed depths beneath that subterranean hall. An adept, standing by, presented with ceremonious gestures a small glazed flask which Zantut with gestures equally formal accepted. As he unstoppered the flask, acrid, resinous, violet-colored fumes rose from its mouth. The adepts knelt as Zantut paced about the ominous block of porphyry, pausing at each of the five holes in the floor to pour into the depths a portion of the fuming contents of the flask.

Then a faint humming was heard, which in a few moments became a steady throbbing as of a slowly beaten drum: and tall, slender threads of violet flame rose from the openings in the floor.

At Zantut's signal, the torches were extinguished.

"They are here, Master," whispered the adept at the right of the altar.

Zantut turned to face the entrance of the hall.

The acolytes were bringing in the veiled Azizah, and Rankin, securely bound.

"Lay them on the altar," commanded Zantut.

The deep resonance of a brazen gong rang down the succession of winding stairways, and rolled and thundered in the vaulted holy of holies.

"The hour is at hand," proclaimed Zantut solemnly. And then, to those who had carried Azizah and Rankin into the sanctuary: "The brethren

from Azerbaijan are late. Did you see any signs of them?"

"Yes, *saidi*. And Ibrahim up there is watching the star of our Lord very closely so as to withhold the final signal until the very last moment. He will strike two warning taps. And then the third, to let you know that the moment has arrived. But they heard the first stroke, and are riding hard to get here in time."

"Very good," acknowledged Zantut, as he stripped from Azizah the silken gauze that enfolded her. "This time our Lord will not be bothered with bungling swordsmen. . . . Unbeliever, would it not have been better to have stayed in *Feringhistan* where you belong?"

To which Rankin, bound and gagged, could reply with neither word nor gesture.

"Ismeddin," thought Rankin, as he saw an acolyte kneel at Zantut's feet and present a long knife and a whetstone, "for once was wrong. . . . That butcher's tool is no thirsty sword. . . ."

Again the solemn, brazen resonance of the gong rolled and surged through the vaulted sanctuary.

"Number two," reflected Rankin. "Thank God she's unconscious. . . ."

As the note of the gong died, there came from above the clank of arms and the tinkle of accouterments, and the measured tread of feet descending the winding stairways.

"Ismeddin and the guard!" exulted Rankin.

And then he heard the measured cadence of voices chanting in an unknown tongue.

"The brethren from Azerbaijan!" shouted the assembled adepts.

And Zantut, with statuesquely formal gestures, stroked the blade of his long knife against the whetstone, with each steely caress pausing to intone a sentence in a language that was forgotten when the last stone of that

sanctuary of devil-worship was laid and awfully cemented into place.

The brethren from Azerbaijan, still chanting, were filing into the hall, and grouping themselves in a crescent about the sacrificial stone.

THROUGH the coolness of the desert's windswept night and through the sultry flame of its day rode Ismeddin and the Shareef, with but an occasional rest to share with their horses a handful of parched corn. But as the sun set on the eve of the 14th of Nisan, Ismeddin reined in the *asil* mare.

"Slowly, uncle. We must let those sons of confusion get into their underground rendezvous with Satan. They are eight . . . eight at least——"

"And doubtless, Hajj Ismeddin," laughed the Shareef, "you are an old man——"

"Praise be to Allah," agreed the darvish, "my days have been many——"

"And pious also," scoffed the Shareef. "But what is your plan, *Haaaji?*"

"The sentry at the entrance must be silenced without disturbance. As for the rest . . . six or seven to one is not so bad. . . . *Inshallah!* but I have a surprize for them. Hot fires for Satan's wings, *saidi!*"

"To our left front, an hour's easy ride from here, is Biban ul Djinni, in which the home of Malik Taûs is buried," continued Ismeddin as he scanned the horizon.

Dusk came swiftly on the heels of sunset. The Shareef followed the dirty white blotch that was Ismeddin's *djellab*, and wondered what strange device the darvish had in mind. For while Ismeddin had signaled the captain of the guard, he had not given him a chance, even with the hardest riding, to overtake them. The encounter would surely be against odds.

From afar they heard the sonorous
(Continued on page 277)

Thirsty Blades

(Continued from page 171)

clang of a gong. The lower edge of the first full moon of spring had just cleared the horizon. Filing down Biban ul Djinni was a caravan of camels and horses, bearing at a steady gait toward a cluster of shattered columns whose stumps towered skyward. As the light of the rising moon grew stronger, they could pick out the figure of a warder on guard in the center of a circular courtyard.

"Worse and worse yet!" exclaimed Ismeddin, as the Shareef drew up beside him. "Though I more than half expected as much. About forty of those sons of Satan. . . . You and I might have taken those seven by surprise——"

"Well, why not wait for the guard, *Haaji?*" demanded the Shareef.

"To late!" snapped Ismeddin. "You heard that gong? A warning signal. That caravan arrived just in time for the sacrifice. You and I must stop it."

"*Wallah!* But the odds are great. . . . Still——"

The Shareef drew his simitar.

"After my own heart, *saidi!*" exclaimed the darvish. "But rash. Let them first get under ground——"

"But how about the sentry?" demanded the Shareef. "He'll give the alarm."

"On the contrary, uncle. Look!"

Ismeddin produced from his capa-

cious wallet a small, glittering object: the effigy of a peacock carved of silver.

"Malik Taûs! The damnation of Allah upon him!" exclaimed the Shareef as he recognized the symbol of the devil-worshippers.

"Follow me!" commanded Ismeddin, as he spurred his weary horse down the steep side of the valley.

They rode boldly now, making no attempt at concealment. The warder standing watch in the center of the ruined courtyard was taking an observation with his astrolabe, following the course of a star that flamed bloodily overhead. Then he set aside his instrument and smote a brazen gong whose golden sheen they could plainly see in the white moonlight. The solemn, vibrant note rolled dreadfully across the valley. The tall figure of doom once more turned his astrolabe on the star whose altitude he was reading.

Ismeddin leaned forward in the saddle, chirping and muttering to his exhausted beast.

"Allah, what a horseman!" gasped the Shareef as he saw the *asil* mare, true to her breeding, stretch out again at a full gallop.

They clattered up the broad avenue, clearing fragments of monstrous columns at a bound, Ismeddin shouting in a language unknown to the Shareef.

The warder started, and turned to face them.

"Hurry, *saidi*! The moment is almost here." And then: "The sign and the symbol!"

Ismeddin extended the silver image of the peacock, and in response to the warder's muttered formula, replied in that same obscure tongue.

The warder bowed, gestured toward the cavernous entrance to the vault, and turned to resume his observations. . . .

The Shareef's blade flickered in the moonlight.

Ismeddin seized one of the torches

that flared smokily at each side of the copper image, and plunged into the depths, three steps at a time.

"SNICK-SNICK-SNICK!" whispered the slender knife as Zantut continued the ceremonial whetting.

"Christ on the mountain tops!" despaired Rankin. "Sharpen that knife and be done with it!"

Rankin sighed, and relaxed as the diabolical whisper of steel against stone ceased, and Zantut, pacing about the altar, passed his hands and knife through each of the five streamers of violet flame. The Dark Prince would this time be victorious without even stepping from his throne. And this was the last chance. . . .

From the depths came the ever-increasing volume of a beaten drum.

"Abaddon in the darkness beats his black drum triumphantly!" intoned Zantut. And then he uttered a word of command, at which the assembled devil-worshippers knelt about the altar.

Zantut, knife in hand, stepped forward.

"Malik Taûs, Lord and Master, accept the sacrifice that Thy servants offer!" he intoned, timing his words so that the last syllable would be coincident with the final stroke of the gong. "Malik Taûs, the Night of Power is at hand. Malik Taûs, the broad moon rises——"

"Halt!" commanded a voice that rang like sword against sword.

Zantut whirled about, knife in hand.

The adepts leaped to their feet.

Ismeddin, sword in one hand, torch in the other, stood in the entrance. Following him came the Shareef.

"Holy darvish! Oh, son of many pigs!" roared the Shareef, and opened fire with his pistol. But the old man's rage was too much for his aim.

"Steady, uncle!" snapped Ismeddin. "You'll hit the girl!"

Zantut and his followers charged, swords drawn.

Ismeddin dashed his blade to the floor, drew from his *djellab* a slim tube the length of his forearm, and touched it with his torch.

The fuse sputtered . . . and then a cascade of sparks and flame.

"There is neither might nor majesty save in Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate!" thundered Ismeddin. "Out, sons of calamity!"

And as he sprayed the devil-worshippers with his torrent of flame, he side-stepped to his right, flanking the howling, smoking, milling company of adepts, driving them toward the entrance of the vault.

The devil-worshippers bolted, Zantut leading.

The Shareef opened fire with his pistol.

Ismeddin tossed aside the dead signal rocket and retrieved his blade.

"*Allah Akbar!*" roared the Shareef as he dropped his emptied pistol, drew his sword, and carved his way into the fugitives, cutting them down as they fought their way up the stairs.

Above the confusion and uproar of the slaughter, Ismeddin heard the clank of arms and the elatter of hoofs in the courtyard, far above them.

"If that's the guard," observed Ismeddin, as he paused to wipe on his *djellab* the blood-drenched grip of his simitar, "all is well. But if it's reinforcements for these sons of flat-nosed mothers, they'll regain their wits . . . Drive hard, uncle!"

And the two graybeards resumed the pursuit, slashing and hacking as they took the steps three at a leap.

"*Bismillahi!*" exclaimed the Shareef, as he paused for breath. And then, listening to the increasing uproar from the courtyard: "Mamoun and the guard are at it!"

"*Wallah!* But he made good time," agreed Ismeddin. "Do you blame me for stealing a few horses like those, Cousin of the Prophet?"

"Not after a night like this," panted the Shareef.

"And now," resumed Ismeddin,

"let us attend to our work downstairs. Much is to be done, and there is little time."

They retraced their steps, picking their way among the devil-worshippers that lay on the slippery stairs.

"Seven . . . eight," counted Ismeddin as he led the way, "nine . . . son of a disease, how did I miss you?"

The old man's blade drove home.

"Nine . . . ten . . . eleven," continued the darvish. "And now, when we release Saidi Rankin, we will see some fighting. The Father of Lies must step from his black throne and meet Abdemon, sword to sword. And if Abdemon defeats him, the promise of Suleiman will at last be kept."

"But he is a *kaffir!*" protested the Shareef. "And my brother's daughter—"

"Be that as it may. If Saidi Rankin wins, it will only be because it so pleases Allah. Would you rather leave her spirit in the hands of Shaitan the Damned? Give me a hand, here," directed Ismeddin, as they halted at the black altar on which the prisoners lay bound.

TOGETHER they pushed the massive block a dozen paces from the throne, then cut the cords that bound Rankin, and removed from between his teeth the piece of wood with which he had been gagged.

"Ismeddin!" gasped Rankin as he stretched his numbed limbs. "How much of this did you foresee?"

"All of it, *saidi*," smiled the darvish. "Except the final outcome. And that, *inshallah*, depends on your sword."

Rankin leaped to the tiled floor and flexed his cramped legs. He stared in wonder at the unveiled features of Azizah.

"Allah, and again, by Allah! Neferte . . . after all these centuries. . . . Then give me a sword!"

"Presently, my lord, presently." And then, to the Shareef: "*Kaffir* or

true believer, she is his . . . for even Satan's fortune can not last forever."

Whereupon Ismeddin with a piece of chalk traced on the floor a circle some ten paces in diameter; and at three of the four cardinal points of the compass he inscribed a curious symbol, and several characters in the ancient Kufic script. Then from his knapsack he took a small box whose contents, a fine, reddish powder, he poured evenly in a circle that inclosed the first circle drawn in chalk, except for a yard-long gap precisely in front of the dark stranger's throne.

"Saidi Rankin—Abdemon, as tonight you are—take your post," commanded the darvish. "Just a pace from the inner circumference, and facing that dark mocker on his lofty throne. Will you use my sword, or that of our lord, the Shareef?"

"Yours will bring me luck, Haaj Ismeddin," replied Rankin. "Though all swords are alike tonight," he concluded, as with a final glance at the sleeping loveliness on the porphyry block, he turned to belt Ismeddin's simitar to his waist.

"No scabbards tonight," directed the darvish. "Take only the blade."

As Rankin took his post, Ismeddin advanced to the foot of the dais. Extending his arms, Ismeddin began his invocation:

"Father of Mockeries, Master of Deceptions," he intoned, "the dusty centuries are weary of your dominion. The word of Suleiman seeks its fulfillment, and the servant of Suleiman awaits your awakening. Dark Prince, Black Lord, the circle of your destiny has been drawn, and a doom awaits you with a sword."

The darvish advanced a step of the ascent to the dais.

"I know your hidden name, and I can speak it to your ruin," continued the darvish; and thus, step by step, he ascended. But on the last step, instead of speaking aloud, he leaned forward and whispered in the ear of the Dark Prince.

“Harkening and obedience,” growled the Presence. And like a doom that marches down the corridors of the world, he strode down the steps of his dais and entered the circle, facing Rankin.

As he crossed the inner circumference, Ismeddin drew at the fourth cardinal point characters and symbols resembling those at the other three; and with a remnant of the red powder, he completed the outer circle. And all the while the Dark Presence stared at Rankin and beyond him cool and unconcerned, scorning even to smile his scorn.

Ismeddin then struck light to the circle of powder. A tall, unwavering green flame crept along the circumference, until Rankin and his opponent were inclosed in a waist-high wall of fire: and this incredible flame emitted an overpowering sweetness that made Rankin's senses reel.

He saw nebulous forms gathering behind the Dark Prince, and crowding against the wall of flame. They muttered to each other, and with their left hands made curious signs. Then, from a great distance, Rankin heard the thump-thump of a drum, and the solemn voice of Ismeddin:

“Abdemon, friend of Suleiman; and you, Iblis, bound to human form, stand in this circle which is neither earth nor high heaven, nor the house of everlasting fire: and this circle but one of you may leave.”

A pause; and then Ismeddin's command: “Strike!”

The drum resumed its savage muttering; and the opponents, swords advanced, circled warily, each seeking an opening in the other's guard. Then swift as thought came a relentless whirlwind of steel that bore Rankin back, step by step. The green flames singed his kaftan. Rankin halted, flat-footed, parrying and returning, cut for cut. And from without the circle of quivering, leaping flame the little drum muttered fiercely the song of doom which old Ismeddin's knuck-

les and finger tips coaxed from its head of serpent hide.

"In four lives you have failed!" taunted the Dark Prince as he paused in his attack, and relaxed, point lowered.

Rankin's blade wavered—groped—then sheared swiftly down and back in a drawing cut to the adversary's forearm.

"You improve with practise!" mocked the Dark Prince as Rankin's blade cut only the poison sweetness of the heavy air. "If you only had another life——"

Then he fell back before Rankin's renewed attack.

Clack-clack-click! Blade against blade, whirling, circling, yielding a step, gaining a step, traversing, dodging: parry, return, and cut again—an endless, deadly mill. The Dark Prince ceased smiling, and his breath came too fast for mockery. But Rankin's tough arm ached to the very shoulder from the merciless, biting assault of steel upon steel. And his head whirled from the everlasting mutter of the snakeskin drum. . . .

The figures crowding against the wall of green flame became more distinct. Their mumbled words became more plain. At times Rankin caught a word, and was glad that he could not understand all. . . .

Steel against steel . . . strength against strength . . . but ages of cunning against the wits of one short life: for only the body of that terrific adversary was human.

The tall flames were diminishing. With them would perish the last chance. Those who had crossed the Border to aid their Prince crowded against the barrier that would soon give way. Rankin wondered if Suleiman's shadowy presence was behind him; but he dared not glance back for even an instant.

The Dark Prince stood fast in the center of the circle, secure in his faultless defense. Rankin knew that when

he had exhausted himself against that flashing barrier of steel, the enemy would resume his deadly assault. Six to one in a side street . . . that was easy . . . but this thirsty blade would soon drink deep. . . . Rankin's arm was numb, and his parry against those biting swift returns was ragged. Just one slip—and that would be any moment now. . . .

The enemy's eye shifted ever so slightly. He measured the height of the diminishing green flame, and smiled again.

Then Rankin cut to the head. The adversary parried, and the hungry blade flamed swiftly in return——

Rankin could not parry. But stretched out in a full lunge, he passed beneath the shearing steel, and drove home with his point——

The green flame flickered and died.

Rankin, still clutching his blade, lurched forward on his face as the Dark Prince crumpled in a heap on the tiles. But before the blackness descended, Rankin caught a glimpse of the shadowy figure of a bearded king who bowed and extended his arm in salutation. And this time the smiling loveliness of the girl at his side was not obscured by any veil. . . .

A strong hand gripped Rankin's shoulder, pulled him back to his knees, and lifted him to his feet.

"*Wallah!*" marveled the Shareef. "*Kaffir* or not, he is the father of all swordsmen! I knew that his head would be clipped off. And then he stretched out and impaled that son of confusion. . . . Look! That stroke sheared off a bit of his turban. Allah, and again, by Allah!"

"Then give him his prize, *saidi*," replied Ismeddin. And to Azizah, who sat upright and wondering on the polished black sacrificial stone: "You need no veil, *ya bint!* After all these dusty centuries, you are his."

Ismeddin turned to the Shareef: "As for me, *saidi*, I will be content

with but one of those *asil* mares you wagered against my cracked head."

"So be it," laughed the Shareef, as he led the way up the blood-drenched stairs. "Though doubtless you will steal the other in due course!"