

EERIE STORIES

*Startling Adventures
in Chilling Horror*

AUGUST, 1937

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Virgins of the

Gripping Novel of Exotic Adventure

By Gates Alexander

CHAPTER I

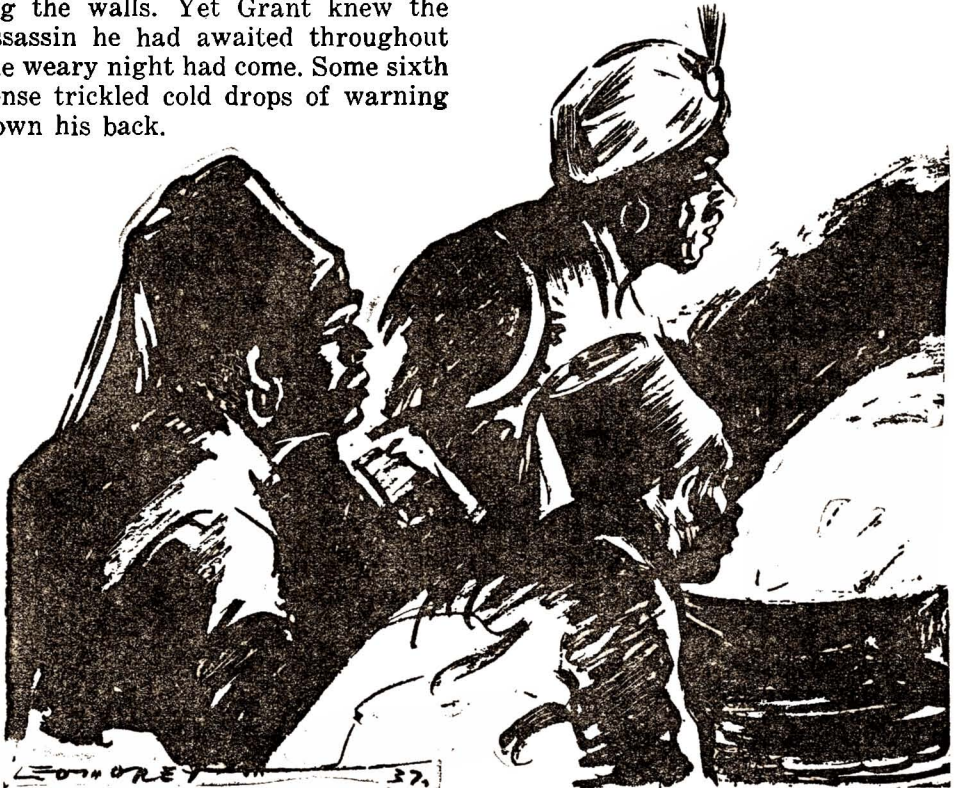
DEATH SHADOWS

THE hall was dark and still. Fragments of light spattered into it from far off, but only deepened the sinister shadows. No whisper of the before-dawn traffic fifteen stories below, penetrated here. Terry Grant, crouched beside a suit of rusted Asian armor, felt more than saw movement close by. Straining eyes and ears, he snaked out his gun.

He heard nothing. There was not even the sibilance of feet on the thick carpets. Nothing brushed the suits of armor, the cluttered exhibit cases lining the walls. Yet Grant knew the assassin he had awaited throughout the weary night had come. Some sixth sense trickled cold drops of warning down his back.

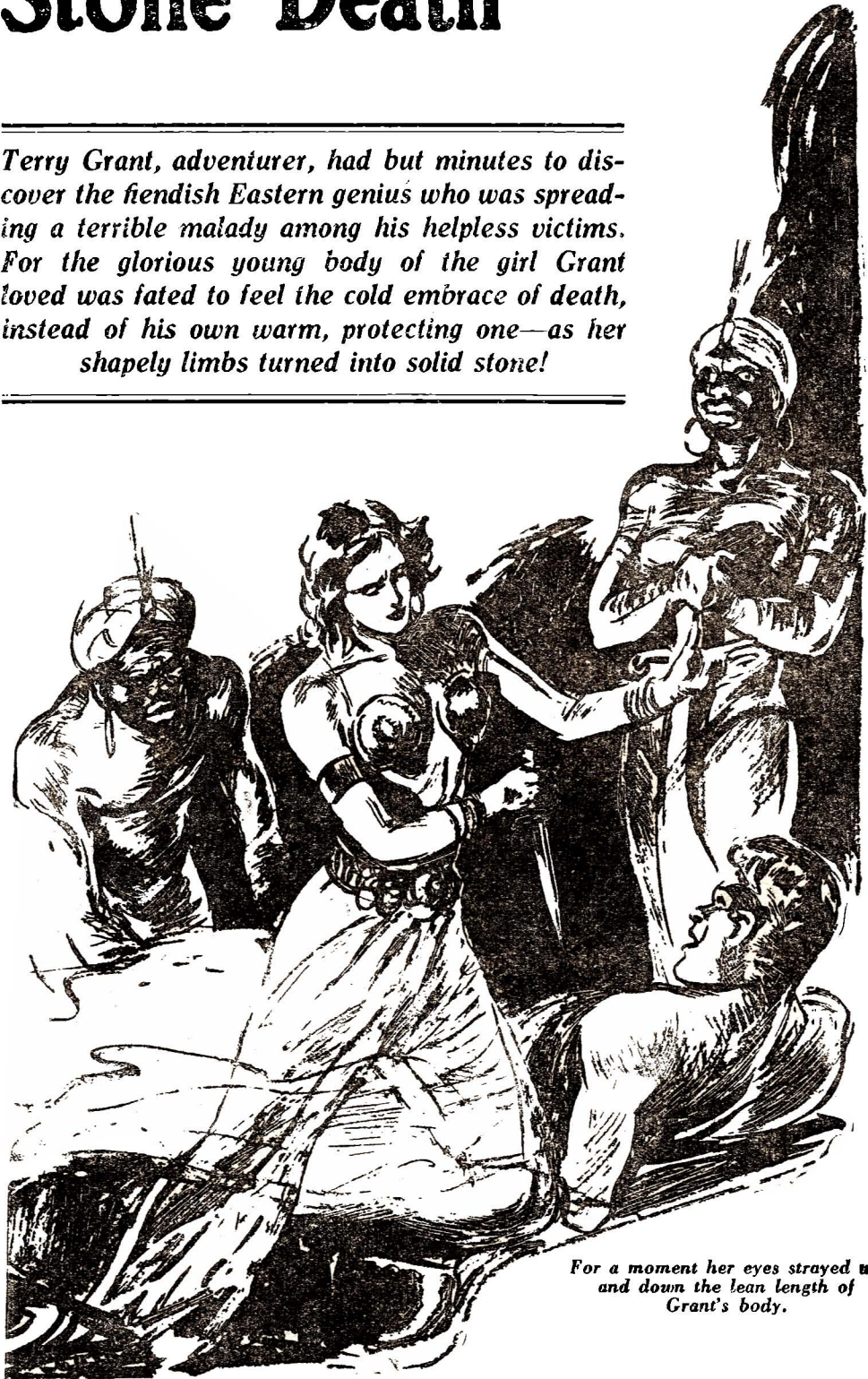
The invader's progress was as sure and swift as a bat fitting through a cavern. Grant, with cautious breath, automatic in his hand, cat-footed up the hall.

At its remote end a feeble glimmer of street light sifted through a small window, and grayed the darkness. Against it Grant spotted the crouched figure of a man. His outline was vague and enormous. The figure seemed to glide rather than walk, and once more Grant thought of a huge bat. He drew a flashlight from his pocket and crept after that shadowy, somehow horrible shape drifting so silently down the hall, down the hall



Stone Death

Terry Grant, adventurer, had but minutes to discover the fiendish Eastern genius who was spreading a terrible malady among his helpless victims. For the glorious young body of the girl Grant loved was fated to feel the cold embrace of death, instead of his own warm, protecting one—as her shapely limbs turned into solid stone!



*For a moment her eyes strayed up
and down the lean length of
Grant's body.*

toward where Colonel Hawks slept, toward where his daughter, Myra, cowered behind a locked door.

Terry Grant had taken the job with his tongue in his cheek, reading with amusement the blackmail letter Colonel Hawks had received. Couched in stilted phraseology, it had demanded two hundred thousand dollars on a threat, if he refused to pay, of turning his daughter, rather terribly, into stone.

The letter had gone into gruesome detail:

First the little toe of that perfect foot will become a trifle stiff; then unmoveable. If you were to touch it, it would be cold and hard as stone, and there would be no feeling in it at all, nor life. It will be dead, a dead member on a living person. Swiftly, but not so swiftly but that your daughter shall know the fear of its spread, the stone death will creep up her feet, up her perfect, symmetrical limbs, pass the jewel-like curves of her hips, and the gripping, icy cold of the stone death will march ahead of it, turning her heart to water. I do not think that you, her father, will enjoy the spectacle of your daughter turning into a statue before your eyes.

Or is your money more precious to you than your daughter's life?

The signature was exquisite, a flourish not readily legible: Achmed ben Hassan.

The threat seemed ridiculous, and in spite of the fat fee offered, Terry Grant had started to turn it down. But beneath those smooth words there had been venom, like vicious snakes masked in the brilliance of tropic flowers.

Then, too, there had been the immediate attraction he had felt for Myra. And she had given him a long, steady, wide-eyed gaze that seemed to promise a delicious reward should he free her of the threatening terror. Clearly the girl was filled with an all-absorbing fear of some dread doom. The expression of her eyes when she had given Grant that long gaze was as plain as though she had used words to say that her instinctive impulse and desire was to give herself to the man who would save her. A private

adventurer, who was youthful, Terry Grant was ready for anything. . . .

Snakes and bats. Certainly there was something equally horrible and venomous about that creeping shadow down the hall. Terry Grant felt a dread of approaching it, a shrinking from cold, writhing coils in the dark.

He forced himself to stride faster now, cutting the distance between himself and the half-seen figure. The flitting shape had merged with the shadow of the right-hand wall, its motion ceased at the door of Myra Hawks.

Every muscle of his tall, athletic body tense, Grant eased closer and closer to the door. He smiled grimly at the idea of its being opened, except from within. Colonel Hawks had loaded upon it a half dozen different bolts and locks, and in its middle an iron rod braced diagonally down to the floor. If every other lock snapped, that one would hold.

Only feet away now from the crouching shadow, Grant could hear muffled metallic fumbling. Suddenly a gray strip of light showed and widened. Grant fought back the gasp of amazement that rose in his throat. The locks had been opened! Good Lord! The man had done the impossible! Cold dread gripped him, but he leaped forward, slashing the darkness with the white gleam of his torch, gun poised.

THE shadow man did not whirl to give battle. He sprang forward into the girl's room, thrust the door violently to close it. Grant was too quick. His foot jammed over the sill, his powerful shoulders heaved. His shout boomed through the house:

"Miss Hawks! On your guard! Colonel Hawks! Help, quickly!"

Strength that matched his own rammed the door against him. His gun was in his hand, but he dared not fire. The girl's bed was directly across from where he battled against the crushing force of this shadow man.

Suddenly Grant rolled his shoulders across the door to the edge. Something struck the middle panel. Blue, glittering steel crunched through the wood where his back had been. The needle point of a dagger glinted. Grant gasped out a strangled cry, eased away from the door. It slammed shut. Instantly he heaved against it again, flung it shuddering inward and dived in close to the floor. Flame lanced from the gun of the invader, but went high.

Myra Hawks, her face a white blur above the bed across the room, found her voice. Shriek after shriek tore through the house. Shouts and pounding came from a distance. Colonel Hawks' bellowing voice, and the answering cries of servants.

Pale slabs of moonlight lay upon the floor, streaming through two iron-screened windows on either side the bed, laying a lattice-work of silver and black. Again Grant was forced to hold his fire, for the shadow stood now directly between him and the girl. He saw a bright glitter of steel. The man turned, flung himself at the girl.

A swirl of bed coverings. The girl's screams soared. She sprang from the bed, cowered against the window. Her nightdress was torn down one side so that a long, gracefully swelling thigh showed, ivory-light, in the lunar shine. With one fluttering hand she clutched at her abbreviated bodice to futilely try to make its top cover the surging uplift of the full-blown breasts beneath. The fingers of her other hand groped frantically to bring together the two torn edges of the nightdress.

Grant hurled himself at the shadow, a human projectile. A glitter of steel streaked toward the paralyzed girl. His hands seized the man's collar. His feet struck and he braced and spun like a hammer thrower, hurling the invader full length upon the floor.

Terry Grant dropped upon him. He felt muscles like steel. The man threw out a hand toward the girl, trying

even while battling for his life to strike at her. For an instant the thing that glittered was framed in cold moonlight, and Grant saw it was a hypodermic needle.

He seized the wrist, and the man's hand bent slowly over so that the point jabbed toward Grant's pinioning fist. With a low curse Grant jerked his hand away. The needle stabbed toward his body.

HE leaped back, snatched out his pistol. The man sprang toward the girl again, needle outthrust. Grant plunged with him. His flashlight smashed on the man's wrist. The needle dropped and the man huddled over it.

The girl's mouth opened in a throat-splitting scream, she plunged sideways, hands outthrust. Light flashed suddenly in the room. Colonel Hawks' voice filled it.

"Myra! Myra dear, you aren't hurt!"

Grant, gun levelled, stood with tense muscles. He shouted suddenly and dived upon the man, hurled him flat upon his back, seized his wrists. The right one dangled limply, broken. The left hand clutched an all-metal hypodermic. The plunger had been thrust all the way down.

The man, prostrate beneath Grant, smiled. The skin was dark, as if browned by tropical suns. His piercing eyes were oddly jubilant.

"Thees time you win, *effendi*," he said in a slurred accent. "But you will not again. There are too many of us too willing to die. It would be wise, Colonel Hawks, if you pay."

Grant wrenched the hypodermic from his grip. The man let it go willingly now, and Grant sprang to his feet, yanking the fellow up, too. Long black robes billowed from his shoulders. He wavered on his feet, flung out his left hand and braced it against the wall.

"If you want me to stand, *effendi*," he said, "you will have to balance me very carefully against the wall."

Terry Grant's mind flashed to that threatening letter, the emptied hypodermic. Good Lord! The emissary of Achmed ben Hassan had inflicted on himself the stone death intended for Myra Hawks.

As he stared awe-struck at the assassin, the man's chest suddenly ceased to pant, and a horrible rigidity spread over his face. The mouth was still open as if in speech, amusement still sparkled in his eyes, and then suddenly they were expressionless, stony.

Grant reached out a slow, fearful hand toward the man's throat. His fingers flinched back from the touch. Achmed ben Hassan's assassin had turned to stone!

CHAPTER II

THE STONE DEATH

FROWNING at the figure of stone that so recently had been a living creature, Terry Grant retreated two slow half paces. The assassin stood rigid, propped up against the wall like a disused board. No rigor mortis could act so quickly. Carter inspected the hypodermic.

It was all metal and the needle could be detached and screwed point inward for safe carrying. He slipped it into his pocket and turned.

The girl had drawn a scarlet mandarin cloak close about her slim body. Her narrow white feet were bare in satin mules. Colonel Hawks, bending over Myra, raised his leonine head with its flowing white hair.

"Sir," he said, "I have you to thank for my daughter's life."

The girl's face was pale, but her low voice was firm. "I cannot thank you enough, Mr. Grant."

Grant bowed suavely. You could not have told from the faultless perfection of his brown, tailored suit that he had been battling for his life and the life of this lovely girl.

"You do me too much honor," he murmured. "Miss Hawks, you had

better occupy some other room to-night."

"There is still danger?" she asked quickly.

Grant shrugged his broad shoulders. "No way of telling. This man tried mighty hard to kill you. He didn't mind dying if he could do that."

Colonel Hawks snapped out: "I'll see you safely to the guest room myself, Myra."

The girl shook her head slowly. Her eyes on Grant's were fraught with some meaning he could not determine, as if she warned him.

Grant spoke slowly: "Before you do, colonel, I'd like to ask Miss Hawks a few questions."

The man's maned head shook emphatically. "In the morning, perhaps, not now."

"I'm all right," the girl said mildly.

Hawks' arm went about her shoulders. "Come, my dear, I'm the best judge of that," he said, and led her away.

Grant frowned after the two. The girl's evidence might be very useful in his immediate inquiry, but the police would have to be called and he'd get a chance to learn the girl's message.

He searched the assassin's body, but found nothing and strode swiftly to a telephone and called the police. He hung up and paced back to the hall toward the bedroom, stopped as if turned to stone in his tracks, then broke into a pounding run. Once more the girl's screams made the night horrible!

THE long, dim hall stretched interminably beneath Grant's speeding feet, but finally he reached the room where the screams sounded, hurled himself against the door. He bounced into the room. Against the windows a man crouched.

Grant's automatic spoke. The answer was mocking, hard laughter. The man sprang to the window sill, outlined like a huge bat, and suddenly

was gone. Grant punched on the light. The girl's screams died to a whimpering moan. She tossed from side to side in the bed. Grant pounded to the window, stared down. Fifteen stories below, a dark, still blot stained the pavement. Another of the assassins had killed himself!

Grant whirled to the girl. She still rolled from side to side, but there was this difference: there was no life in the movement of her feet and legs. They were like inanimate logs fastened to her.

Quickly her arms went up to Terry Grant, and in another second she had pulled him down close to her. Her flushed face, wet with tears, was pressed against his cheek. Panting with sheer fright, her breasts surged against his chest. She was trembling in his arms like a child seeking safety and comfort. Grant's pulse quickened at the delectable closeness of her. Slowly he disengaged her arms from around him. . . .

"I feel so cold, so cold!" she wept.

Colonel Hawks plunged into the room.

For heaven's sake, what's happened?" he cried.

Grant darted past him, raced to the phone, yelling for an ambulance, slammed back into the room. The whimpering had ceased, and Colonel Hawks was a crumpled, beaten figure by the bed, his leonine head bowed above his daughter's body.

The lines of her face had stiffened in a horrid mask of fear. Even her hair seemed rigid as stone. The marble-like gaze of her eyes struck into Grant's heart, accusing him. She and her father had depended on him for protection, and he had failed.

Grant's long face was haggard and thin, his eyes burned. Colonel Hawks stiffened beside the bed, jerked up his head, glowered at Grant.

"Get out!" he said hoarsely.

Grant's eyes jerked to his. Colonel Hawks repeated slowly:

"Get—out—of—here!"

Grant said calmly: "I can't blame you for feeling that way."

The man took a full stride toward Grant, fists clenched. "Will you get out of here? I hire you at enormous fees to protect my daughter and myself, because you have built a fabulous reputation. But you're just a cheap crook like the rest of them. Get out of here!"

Grant's eyes bored into Hawks'; and his whole body was rigid with anger. He had failed, it was true, but he felt sure no human ingenuity could long resist this Achmed ben Hassan, whose servants killed themselves lest they betray their master.

Anger burned in him like white-hot iron. "Okay, Colonel Hawks," he said. "I'll leave, but nothing on earth can keep me from following this case to its end. And I'll catch this Achmed ben Hassan. He has discredited me, and he preys on women, and—" he bowed gravely—"I'm a man of sentiment."

He whirled and strode out of the apartment, slid behind the wheel of his Hispana Suiza. His high forehead wrinkled with thought, he shot the powerful car out toward the open country. He had a problem and long drives helped him think clearly.

His foot was heavy on the accelerator and the drone of his motor was a song of speed. Apartments swept past him, then smaller homes, interspersed by trees.

Terry Grant was giving much of his thought to Myra Hawks. Beautiful, desirable—a thousand times, yes. Any red-blooded man would desire her, madly. But there was something that he had seemed to read deep down in her eyes that made the young adventurer begin to think that he felt more than passion for the gorgeous colonel's daughter. Grant was beginning to feel that he wanted more than to possess only her ripe young, glorious body; that he wanted the girl's real, lasting love. And now she lay in a strange, trancelike state that was induced by some horrible East-

ern drug, perhaps fated to feel the cold embrace of Death's arms instead of his own warm, protecting clasp.

He became aware then that bright twin headlights were on his trail. Grant shot his car more rapidly ahead. The machine hung on. The last of the houses were past now, and he rolled through lonely park lands that invited speed. The Hispana took the challenge, roared like a comet. But those dogging headlights hung on.

Grant, a grim smile on his mouth, loosened his automatic in its holster and eased up on the accelerator.

His quick eyes flung ahead, spotted a low bridge. He spurted, slewed to a stop just beyond the arch, backed onto smooth grass at the roadside, cut motor and headlights. He sat waiting, tensely, gun in hand.

EVERY sound in the world seemed to cease with the stopping of the Hispana's motor. There was no distant mutter of an engine. The bridge cut off the sound, Grant thought. He had been too far ahead for the assassins to have seen him stop. Nevertheless his tenseness increased as he cranked down the special windshield flat against the cowl to clear the decks for battle.

He sat so for some minutes, and still no following car appeared. Grant twisted about and searched the skyline above the bridge. Nothing moving there. Nothing moving anywhere. Just the still, sinking moon in the sky, and in the distance the rasping double croak of a tree frog.

Grant cursed under his breath, unfolded his long, lithe body from beneath the wheel, and toiled up the rise to the bridge.

The grassy slope was slippery with dew, studded with shrubs, and Grant, struggling up its steep incline, bent almost double. The gun was alertly ready in his fist. The bridge gave him a wide sweep of road dully lighted by the moon.

The highway was a white, unspot-

ted river. Nothing there that might be a car. His eyes pierced the shadows. The car might have been parked in the edge of the woods, with lights out. Achmed ben Hassan's assassins might be creeping upon him even now.

Grant snorted at his fears. That car must have turned off into some side road he had missed. He strode back and half slid down to his car. He jerked open the door, heard the soft pad of furtive feet. He whirled too late.

Strangling silken folds jerked tight over his face, around his throat, and throttled him. A sweetish odor clogged his nostrils. He twisted his gun behind him and fired. A man screamed in pain, then the gun was wrenched from his hand. The silken garrote tightened. The odor choked him. Grant was sinking, sinking, sinking into blackness.

CHAPTER III

SLAVES OF ACHMED

TINKLING lute strings, faint as an ancient memory, was the first sound Terry Grant consciously heard. His senses drifted slowly back, but with rare presence of mind he forced his eyelids to remain closed, trying to orient himself. He continued his deep, regular breathing. Delicate, flowerlike perfume wafted over him.

He realized he lay upon soft cushions, his fingers, moving fractionally, snagged on silk. He heard girls' voices near by.

Queer he felt no headache from that attack on the road, no pain in throat or lungs. He slit his eyes and peered out through the mesh of his lashes. A wall straight ahead of him was twenty feet away and hung with exquisite tapestry. To its right was an arched opening through which sunlight streamed.

The whispers at his side had ceased, and only the archaic tinkling of the lute continued. Grant rolled his

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head over slowly, then blinked in bewilderment.

Lolling on cushions beside the heap of luxurious silk on which he lay, were two girls of dark and exquisite beauty. Their eyes were large and dark in pale fair faces, and jeweled fillets bound their locks.

As Grant gazed in amazement, the two girls rose and swept slow salaams, and he realized with a start that their clothing consisted of jeweled plates about their bosoms and diaphanous skirts which hung low on softly curving hips. They stood with hands folded modestly, with downcast eyes. One spoke in a low, musical voice:

"Master, we are thy slaves."

Grant squeezed his eyes tightly shut, opened them again. The girls were still there. He thrust himself up from the cushions, sitting erect with an effort, and frowned upon the two unbelievable beauties.

"In God's name," he asked softly, "who are you?"

"The handmaidens of Allah," the one who had first spoken replied, and Grant cried out:

"Achmed ben Hassan!"

The girls before him showed by no slightest change of expression that the name meant anything to them, and Grant went on:

"You will tell me next, I suppose, that I am in paradise, or whatever the Mohammedan equivalent of that is."

The girl, startled, peered into his face with wide eyes and said:

"Surely, thou art no unbeliever!"

Grant frowned, swore under his breath, got abruptly to his feet.

The girls bowed, "What is it my lord requires?"

"Let me speak with Allah," Grant said grimly.

The girl salaamed again and said: "This way, my lord," and moved off with a slow, gliding step that was almost music. Grant saw her feet were bare and that the nails were stained with henna. Through the

transparent sheerness of her skirts, Grant saw plump calves, dimples that came and went behind the knees with every step, and the voluptuous widening and fullness of feminine lines above the twinkling dimples.

A few paces along the high-walled corridor, and they were about to pass a partly draped entrance when Grant slowed his pace at the sound of seductive, oriental music and the heavy odor of some Eastern incense that cloyed powerfully with the senses.

Elandi, looking over her shoulder, smiled as she saw Terry Grant slow his steps. Still smiling, she turned, took his hand and led him to the portieres. Then she drew them aside enough for him to look into the richly appointed chamber that was revealed. He involuntarily sucked in his breath. He was gazing at all the sensual beauty and studied passion and depravity of an Eastern debauch.

Their eyes glazed and slightly staring, men and women sprawled lazily upon the richly cushioned floor, where slowly they embraced each other with careful, studied motions. The men had stripped to the waist, retaining only their bright-colored pantaloons of vivid silk. Even as Grant watched, the men clasped the women more tightly to them, increased the tempo of their kisses. Soft bosoms heaved faster and faster under the jewel-studded metal cups that half covered them.

Grant turned to look at Elandi as he felt the pressure of her hand on his increase. Her soft, velvet-dark eyes were clouding with unmistakable passion—the unleashed passion of the East, knowing no bounds when once released. She moved closer to him, invitation mixing with the growing passion in her eyes, and Terry Grant could see that, after all, she was as childlike as a tamed doe, but probably instilled with the evil customs of the East since her earliest teens.

Dull thuddings, which clanked faintly, sounded. Without looking back into the room, Grant guessed

that jeweled breastplates were falling to the thick Turkish rug on the floor. The seductive music increased its tempo, faster, faster. Elandi moved still closer, until one rounded thigh pressed him closely. Terry Grant began to lose sense of time and space; then he set his lean jaws tightly, shook himself slightly and said:

"No, Elandi, I command that you let me speak with Allah—now!"

The girl lowered her soft eyes, an expression of hurt crossing her ivory-skinned face. Then she dropped Grant's hand and moved off along the hall, beckoning him to follow.

Following her with lithe, strong strides, he swiftly studied the building. It appeared to be oriental in every respect. It was plaster and stone. The doorways were low and the rooms draped with gorgeous rugs and silk. Windows were eastern arches, and across them were iron lattices.

They reached finally a huge carved door, and the girl salaamed again and stepped aside. Grant stopped and regarded her.

"Your name?"

"Elandi, master."

"You go no farther than this?"

"It is forbidden, master. We are thy slaves, and none other may look upon us."

Grant frowned and ran his hand up over the twin peaks of his forehead.

"Not even if I order it?"

"If you order it, master, I will go."

Fright trembled in the girl's voice.

Grant asked softly:

"Why are you afraid?"

THE girl trembled even more and folded her arms so that her right hand lay upon her left shoulder and her left upon her right. She said, "If you will come I will show you why."

Grant hesitated, then nodded; and she led the way through a side passage that grew increasingly dark. The blackness suddenly seemed to turn green, and gradually a pale-green

light diffused into the air as they entered a small, long chamber.

At the other end was a cabinet. The girl stopped in the doorway, and her trembling was more noticeable than ever.

"If you will look in that cabinet," she said, "you will know why I dare not disobey."

Grant, something in him rebelling at all this mummery, sped across the room, sprang up low stairs to the cabinet, thrust out his hand to the door.

But even so, with his hand outstretched, he paused. Might this not be some trick, some device of Achmed ben Hassan, who sought to get him within his power?

Terry Grant snorted at that foolishness. He was in Achmed's power! He grasped the knob of the doors. At the touch, the portals folded back. Within the cabinet stood a girl.

Golden hair streamed over her shoulders, her body was exquisite, but her face was twisted into gargoyle ugliness by fear. The eyes stared wide, the mouth was open as if to scream. But there was no life in her. She might have been a statue, a stone statue, except for the golden, cascading loveliness of her hair.

Another victim of the creeping death of Achmed ben Hassan, the agonized contortion of her face contrasted grotesquely with the slender beauty of her naked body, half hidden by the down-flowing golden tresses.

Anger swept in a white-hot tide over Grant as he stood there, and he strode across the room. A voice boomed into it, a voice that might have come from anywhere, and nowhere.

The girl prostrated herself on the floor, terror-stricken. Grant stopped tensely, fists clenched, head thrown back defiantly. The great voice boomed out:

"I challenge thee, Grant! Death with the girl in the cabinet, or life with the girl on the floor!"

Grant's eyes ran swiftly over the ceiling, searched the walls. He strode across and tore aside a tapestry—only blank stone behind it. The voice boomed laughter.

"You have until tonight to decide. What you wish you need only ask for—and the girl is thy slave."

Grant crossed to her. "Get up!" he bit out, and the girl, still cowering, rose to her feet.

"Take me to Allah," he said.

She gasped out: "But that was the voice of Allah!"

A grim smile lighted Grant's face. "I want to see him face to face."

The girl's eyes were wide, her head began to shake slowly from side to side, then violently, and she protested:

"No! No! It is not permitted. The sight of Allah means death."

"Just the same," Grant insisted slowly, "I want a look at him. If that's Allah, he talks a whole lot like a human being. Lead on, Elandi."

Elandi moved slowly near to Terry Grant, velvet-dark eyes turned up to him pleadingly. Then her arms were around him. He heard her bare feet whisper softly over the floor, closer to his, and she was straining all the softness of her small body against him until the metal plates that half covered her breasts were digging sharply into his diaphragm.

"It would be better that you take me, as the Master has suggested," she whispered. "I fear for you; I fear for both of us."

For a moment, Terry Grant hesitated; then he patted the girl's bare back comfortingly, and said: "Do as I ask you—lead the way."

The girl started tremblingly down the passage, and the green luminance of the chamber of death faded into blackness. Then there was a distant gleam of sunlight and they were back in the chamber where Grant had first regained consciousness.

"Listen," he said shortly, "this isn't the place you were taking me at first."

The other girl had vanished now, and the lute music had ceased, and Elandi stood in the middle of the room, her arms hanging at her sides, palms forward in a gesture of supplication.

"Allah is everywhere," she said. "If he wishes you to see him you may. If not—" She lifted one shoulder in a small shrug, moved toward him on gliding, dancing feet, her filmy skirt swaying. She put her hands upon his shoulders. The nails were hennaed and her dark hair was scented with musk. Her voice sank to a whisper.

"Do you yearn for death? Why not forget whatever it is that the voice of Allah has warned you against? Why not live here," her whispering voice became a fragrant breath that fanned his mouth, "with me?"

Grant raised her chin with a hand, and his eyes studying hers were weary.

"Nice child," he said.

He led her to the couch, looked down with a strange, hard smile on his face.

"I am going," he said, "for a little walk."

CHAPTER IV

TWO MEN DIE

GRANT'S long-legged stride sped him across the room, out the exit he and the girl had first used. Hallways and trick entrances confused him, but eventually he stood at the heavy, carved door behind which the girl had said previously was the voice of Allah.

He seized the knob, and the door swung inward, revealed a long, high room at the far end of which stood an empty, golden throne. A dozen men strolled about. One or two glanced at him curiously, but none spoke.

Grant's long stride was slow and determined. He marched up the center of the room, straight up the low steps and sat upon the throne.

For a moment there was absolute silence, the men frozen into statues of amazement. There was a sudden surge and shrill cries, and they raced down the room, jammed about the foot of the throne steps. They did not seem to dare to advance farther.

Grant leaned forward, putting his elbow on his knee and regarded the men with apparent disinterest, his face calm.

"I'd like to have a little chat with Allah," he said. "What hocus-pocus do you use to call his attention to the fact that I'm here?"

A great voice boomed out suddenly overhead. There was anger in it.

"Down, fool! Down upon your knees, and pray for forgiveness!"

Grant leaned carelessly back in the throne and crossed his knees.

"Sorry to disappoint you," he said casually, "but the floor looks mighty hard."

The men before him had dropped down, and their foreheads were bowed until they touched. One straightened and raised his hands above his head, crying:

"Oh Allah, what shall thy servants do to avenge this insult!"

"Horseradishes," Grant grunted and strolled down the throne steps. "Listen, you bozos, this is all a fake. That lad has got a radio up there and he's broadcasting, and that's all this voice of Allah business amounts to."

The great voice trembled with fury now. "Seize him!"

A half dozen men leaped on Grant, and dragged him down, pinioning him flat on his back on the floor. A man with a sour, blackened face drew a long knife and laid its blade against Grant's throat. He gazed at the wall above the throne as if awaiting orders.

The full, resonant glow returned to the voice.

"Grant, you are a brave man, and a foolish one, and over-bold. Still I would use your brain in my business. Will you serve me—or die?"

Grant twisted and stared up at the vacant throne, and short laughter barked from his lips.

"Neither!" he said sharply, and felt the knife prick his throat. His narrowed, dark eyes glared into those of the man who gripped it.

"Listen, fool!" he said. "If you strike without orders you're going to be in a hell of a tough spot."

The man grinned savagely and turned his head heavily and stared up above the throne. Grant's voice rose peltingly.

"You are not served by men, but by skulking dogs. I could conquer any three of them at one time."

He looked around at the angry circle of faces, bent intently over his recumbent form. "Run on and play with your paper dolls," he growled.

The voice was mild and vague. "Youseff."

The man with the knife looked up. "Youseff, kill thyself."

THE man blinked his small black eyes once, took two steps out into the room, faced the throne and thrust the knife to the hilt in his breast.

He stood swaying a moment with his hand on the hilt of the weapon, an exaltation in the small eyes fixed on the empty throne. Then his knees gave and he twisted and fell to his back.

"Mohammed," came the soft voice again, "hurl thyself from that window!"

A man ran across the room and dived over the high railing. Grant's eyes were twin points of anger.

"Are you men or slaves," he flung at his captors, "to kill yourselves at the mere whim of this fake?"

The booming voice of the unseen master, gentle now, was the only answer:

"Is there any living king, Grant, who is served as I am? Can you afford not to ally yourself with one so powerful? I grant you ten minutes to think. If you refuse, they will be your last ten minutes of life."

Terry Grant cried hoarsely: "Then call off your pack of dogs, and let me think!"

The men snarled over him, but the voice called them off. Grant got slowly to his feet and paced the long throne room. Arched windows showed a sunset, but a wall hid the earth. Against the varicolored west a hump-backed monoplane was flying, heading south, and the hum of its motors came distantly.

A blond man with blue, kindly eyes strolled up to Grant and said: "You have five minutes left."

The double, carved doors at the other end of the room burst open, and Elandi ran on little dancing feet into the room.

The men shouted angrily and converged on her, but the booming voice of the unseen filled the room again, halting them. The girl glanced with wide, frightened eyes about the room, saw Grant and ran toward him with outstretched arms, seized his coat with her little hennaed hands and turned beseeching dark eyes up on his face.

"The voice told me to come in here," she said swiftly, "and I am terribly afraid; for women are not allowed in the throne room. It means their death."

Grant patted her on the shoulder. "I'll take care of you, child," he said.

The blond, slight man with the kindly, blue eyes said softly: "You have one minute left."

Grant thought desperately, ran his hand up over his high-peaked forehead into his dull hair. Suddenly powerful hands seized his arms and wrists. The girl uttered a little, smothered cry, and Grant jerked angrily in her direction and saw that she too was held by two men.

They were marched with the slow, solemn pace of a sacrificial parade back to the throne and the deep, booming voice sounded again.

"Well, Grant, my ally or my enemy?"

Grant threw up his head defiantly.

"Just a moment, Grant," came the voice. "You speak not alone for yourself. If you die the girl dies also. It is a little custom of ours. I know she means nothing in particular to you, but she is a woman, and you are an American . . . a man of sentiment, I have heard. Now, Grant, your decision."

Terry Grant turned his head slowly and looked at the girl and found a dagger presented at her breast. Her face was white and her eyes pleaded. Strangely it was her little, henna-tinted feet that moved him. They looked so like a child's. Grant squared his shoulders and glared at the throne.

"You hold all the trumps," he said slowly.

CHAPTER V

ACHMED STRIKES

TERRY GRANT straightened aching shoulders, glanced about him. The interior of his Hispana Suiza was wet with dew. The windshield was misted.

Grant dragged a hand heavily across his high forehead, leaned forward against his clenched fist and tried to think. He remembered perfectly a girl with bare feet and hennaed nails and eyes who cried for help; or was it all a fantastic dream? A girl who had pleaded to give him her soft, young body to save them both from death.

Grant felt rapidly through his pockets and came upon a long, thin roll of vellum. He opened it and with frowning eyes read:

Hear and obey. If you fail, you die.

Achmed ben Hassan.

A bitter, thin smile twisted his lips. Achmed had drugged him, hasheesh probably, and had him transported back to his car. And he demanded obedience. Grant's smiling lips became hard. He kicked the starter and sent the Hispana roaring toward town.

One thing stood clearly out in his mind, the picture of a humpbacked monoplane speeding across a sunset sky. He knew the Stinson had a profile like that. There was a bare chance that through this knowledge he might locate the aerie of Achmed ben Hassan.

Grant sped straight to his home, a high, quiet penthouse he had taken after gangsters had wrecked his previous quarters during his terrific battle against the Blue Terror.

On his way he bought a newspaper, and once in the lofty aloofness of his apartment he read it hurriedly. The date told him he had been in the stronghold of Achmed forty-eight hours. Its pages told him other things, too. The death of Colonel Hawks' daughter—she was actually his ward, the story stated—had revealed a widespread blackmailing plot by Achmed ben Hassan.

Dozens of letters such as the one Hawks had received had been sent out, and many had paid with the threat of horrible death hanging over them. Authorities were working madly to checkmate the assassins.

Terry Grant, tough young survivor of an hundred hair-raising adventures, felt licked for the first time in his life. Myra was dead. What use was there to bother any more to find her fiendish murderer? Vengeance would not bring life back to her glorious young body; open again those beautiful eyes so that the light of her soul might shine forth. But dull, bitter anger began to suffuse Grant. He would avenge Myra Hawks' death if it were the last thing he ever did. . . .

Grant phoned his office and ordered his corps of assistants to place every single-motored Stinson in the country at sunset the day before. He hung up on their excited questions about himself and snapped suddenly out of his chair, whirling with his gun in his hand. No one in sight. Yet he had heard glass tinkle in breaking and a thump on the soft, thick carpet.

Grant's swift eyes spotted a stone in the middle of the floor with paper tied around it. He darted through French doors to the roof. The sunlight was dazzling. No one in sight, and except for the rumble of distant traffic, there was no sound, no drone of airplane motors. The nearest building was a hundred yards away.

Grant slowly holstered his gun, strode back into the living room, picked up the stone. The paper tied about it was a note.

The note said:

It would be wise, effendi, if you would ally yourself with the police, then frustrate all their plans where the pursuit of Achmed ben Hassan is concerned. It is for this that your life and brain were spared. Remember, if you serve well and faithfully, there are countless rewards. If you fail, there is the Stone Death.

Achmed ben Hassan.

Grant cursed under his breath, ran his hand swiftly up over the dual peaks of his forehead into his dull hair. His dark eyes were angry, an ugly light in them. The phone rang. Grant still stared down at the ornate chirography.

There was a postscript. It stated that when need arose, some one would make a contact with him for his "report." Grant shredded the note with the previous one and set them afire on an ash tray.

The phone rang again, more insistently, and Grant crossed to it in quick long strides.

"Grant speaking."

"Thank God you've come back," a man's voice poured words into his ear. "We want to hear your version of the Hawks murder, and you must help us, too. Gregory Delaney has been threatened now."

Grant asked quietly: "Who's speaking?"

"Inspector Littleman," the voice snapped back, and Grant remembered a small, lean man with a dark, intent face.

"You want me to go to Delaney's house?"

"At once!" Littleman barked. "You fought these assassins at Hawks' house. You know how they work. Your help in guarding Delaney will be invaluable."

As Grant prepared to leave, he realized that he was banking a lot on his assistants locating the single-motored Stinson he had seen fly close by the strange palace in which he had been kept prisoner. He knew from comradeship in all parts of the world with those daring operatives of his that they would work fast and diligently.

A PRIVATE, automatic elevator dropped Grant to the street. He sank back into the leather cushions of his Hispana gratefully and the deep-throated motor dragged him swiftly up Fifth Avenue, across to Columbus and up Riverside Drive to the great stone mansion of Gregory Delaney.

A picketed iron fence surrounded grounds thick with shrubbery. A policeman clanged open the gate and Grant nodded and strode quickly past, keen eyes noting the layout of the grounds. A thousand hiding places in those shrubs, but the black outline of the fence was clear against the opposing buildings.

He spotted Littleman's small, wiry figure in uniform and nodded briefly to the lean-faced inspector of police.

"We have three hours before dark," Grant said rapidly. "Let's have floodlights rigged to cover those fences all around the grounds. Then if we post enough men around, the assassins can't possibly get in—or away."

Littleman nodded and issued orders.

"And that's about all we can do," Grant said. "Checked the servants yet?"

Littleman nodded. Something white struck and bounced in front of them and the two men crouched, snatching ready guns. Nothing to be seen, no one near. Grant's brow was wrinkled

angrily. Littleman picked up the paper tied to a rock, read slowly:

The penalty of treachery is death.

Achmed ben Hassan.

A warning to him, Grant knew, but Littleman frowned over the message, shrugged it aside. The two redoubled their efforts to fortify the Delaney mansion.

When darkness fell three hours later, Grant was making a round of the sentinels, churning his way through the shrubbery, searching every inch of the mansion's grounds.

Silence lay over the place on the Drive. Clouds rolled overhead and the earth sucked down darkness like a blotter absorbing ink.

Grant nearly stumbled into a shoulder-high clump of spirea, circled it on wary feet. He cursed softly to himself. The backglow of the floodlights, revealing the black bars of the fence, only made his own task more difficult.

He was on edge, his nerves taut. He felt slightly superstitious about Achmed, as if the man were a doom upon him. He was conscious also that police were keeping him closely under eye. He wondered if Colonel Hawks had repeated his charges of criminal neglect or attempted to connect him with the assassins.

His swinging hand struck a barberry bush, and he whistled, jerking it away and sucking it, glaring down at the thorny shrub. Something metallic gleamed within it and he leaped back.

His spring was just in time. Two men exploded from the bush with upraised knives. His years of juggling, of split-second analysis of motion, stood him in good stead now. He plunged to the right. As the knives slashed down, his left fist shot out, hurled one man against the other.

They tangled, plunged to the ground. Grant whipped out his gun and slashed down on the nearest head. Police sentries shouted, three

ploughed headlong along through the shrubbery.

The second man, protected by his now unconscious companion's body, slashed at Grant's legs. The tall adventurer danced out of range, weaved about, seeking an opening. Suddenly he leaped backward. The unconscious body seemed to spring at him from the ground. It caught his ankles and he half stumbled.

Police were just behind him now, shouting loudly. Grant, off-balanced momentarily, saw the second man leap to his feet, saw steel glitter in his hand as it swept back; then Grant fell face down on the ground. Steel whispered above his head. A choking scream shivered up into the black night.

Instantly Grant was on his feet again. The man flashed away over the grounds. Grant, pursuing, darted a glance over his shoulder. A policeman was a swaying figure against the white floodlights, his hands tugging at a knife in his chest.

GRANT raced on through the shrubs. The murderer had disappeared, vanished entirely.

Inspector Littleman's short, striding legs brought him panting to Grant's side. They dashed back to the prisoner and the stabbed policeman. The officer was dead.

Littleman ordered the grounds searched, handcuffed the prisoner and, with Grant, herded him up the marble stairways of the mansion to an elaborate drawing-room.

Grant thrust the prisoner into a chair. The man was dark-visaged, hawk-nosed. He glared savagely, handcuffed hands buried in his sleeves.

"Where's your plane?" Grant demanded.

The man bared long yellow teeth in a snarling smile, said nothing.

Grant said softly: "You don't fear death, I know, but many things can

happen to a man before he dies." He spun on his heel, long-legged across the room, borrowed a cop's nightstick. He wrapped it in newspaper, came back and thrust it under the prisoner's nose.

"We have a new sort of nightstick," he said softly. "Shall I—demonstrate it to you?"

Littleman growled: "Here, give me that. I know how to use it." He crouched and snapped it against the dark-faced man's shins. It rang hollowly, like a stick on concrete, and the prisoner gave no sign that he felt the blow at all.

Grant's eyes narrowed. He sprang to the man and seized both his wrists, wrenched the hands out of the sleeves. A metal hypodermic needle clattered to the floor. The prisoner smiled mockingly.

"Not even the scourge of Allah could hurt me now," his words grew blurred. The mocking leer froze on his mouth.

"This is the Stone Death, Littleman," Grant said heavily. "Achmed's men all kill themselves to protect him."

They went through the man's clothing, but found only another of those carefully penned notes and a six-foot strip of leather which widened to about two inches at its middle, and had a loop at one end. Grant held it up.

"That explains how Achmed's notes are delivered. A sling, and a powerful one. It could hurl a rock two hundred yards."

"More damn fool things mixed up with this case," Littleman growled. "Here, let me see that letter."

He opened it, glanced at it swiftly, then peered up with eyes hard as agates. His hand flashed under his coat, jammed a long-nosed revolver into Grant's middle.

"You're one of Achmed ben Hassan's men we'll make talk," he bit out.

CHAPTER VI

A MURDER MISTAKE

GRANT submitted to search by two policemen Littleman called, but his eyes were ugly in his thin, long, face. His voice rasped:

"You will explain this, Littleman, or I'll have you kicked off the force!"

Littleman laughed shortly. He seemed to swell with triumph. "I've suspected you for a long time, Grant. You solve cases too easily. You couldn't do it if you weren't in with the crooks you trap. And I've noticed this: men you capture always die."

Grant glared. "You don't even capture any, Littleman."

Littleman's doubled fists drove hard toward Grant, pinioned helplessly by the two policemen. The inspector's face was red with fury.

Grant said wearily: "Stow that!"

Littleman glowered at his captive and said heavily:

"This last note we took from Achmed's assassin goes like this." He drew the paper from his pocket and read somewhat laboriously:

This is the price, Grant, of those who betray their master.

Achmed ben Hassan.

Grant jerked his head impatiently.

"Can't you see it's just a trick?" he demanded. "Achmed is clever as hell. He's just trying to make trouble between you and me so his assassins will have no trouble in getting to Delaney."

Littleman laughed nastily: "I'm afraid it's no use, Grant. I'll just put you where you can't help out—your master. Judson, there's a radio car in the drive. Take Grant to headquarters. See that he gets hold of no one and tell them to keep a guard on him to keep him from killing himself."

Grant grinned thinly: "You needn't worry, Littleman, I'm going to survive just to get back at you for this!"

Judson growled, "Okay," and then

Littleman returned Grant's stare with hostile intensity.

"And look out for this guy, Judson. He's slippery as an eel, and dangerous."

Judson said, "I'll take care of him," and he slipped a handcuff on Grant's left wrist and locked him to his own right arm.

"He won't get away from me, inspector," Judson said. "Come on, you!" and he jerked the handcuff and strode off across the room with Grant at his side.

The lanky detective made no resistance. His eyes were nearly closed and there was tense anger in the stiff abrupt swing of his shoulders. The cop climbed into the car first, still handcuffed to Grant, and the tall detective folded his lanky body into the seat beside him. Grant clicked the door, stared down at his feet and said laconically: "Home, James!"

Judson glared at him out of the corner of his eye and then down at the handcuffs fastening Grant's left hand to his right. He lifted their two hands toward the dashboard to turn on the ignition but didn't do it and let the hands fall back to the seat between them again and looked at them.

Judson muttered under his breath, and Grant said: "I beg pardon? I didn't hear you," and the cop growled, "Oh, go to hell."

Suddenly he began to smile. He pulled Grant's arm over so that the handcuffs were against the steering post, then rapidly unlocked the bracelet about his own wrist and fastened it to the steering post of the car.

Grant watched him with amusement at the back of his eyes. The cop leaned back with a sigh of relief, then reached over Grant's arm to turn on the ignition, reached under his arm to shift gears. Grant said dryly: "That was a very clever stunt, Judson. It makes everything so convenient."

The policeman growled and tugged his visored cap down over his fat, ruddy face.

"Chief said not to take any chances with you and I'm not," he said, and spurred the car down the drive, waited while two other policemen opened the gate, then shot on downtown.

Grant began to squirm in his seat as the car shot down the Drive, pushed over to Columbus Avenue and then over to Fifth. "Listen, Judson," he said. "As a favor to me would you mind going down some other street than Fifth? I don't fancy having my friends seeing me handcuffed like this."

Just then the lights went red, and Judson, with a grunt, whirled left, down a dark, deserted side street. Grant swayed to the right, then lurched to the left, jamming the elbow of his handcuffed hand over both of Judson's. His right hand cut off the ignition, balled into a fist, and flashed to Judson's jaw.

Grant had trouble getting strength behind the blow. Judson was only dazed, and Grant was compelled to slam his fist again to the policeman's jaw before he was out.

The car coughed to a halt, Grant's swift fingers found the handcuff key in the policeman's pocket, unlocked himself. He hauled the policeman to his side of the seat, handcuffed him, and gagged him with two handkerchiefs from his pocket.

WITHIN a minute and a half after he had jammed his elbow into the cop's side he was driving the car swiftly toward his own apartment. He switched the radio on and immediately it began to squawk:

"General alarm," it said, and even in the stereotyped tones of the announcer there was excitement. "Pick up man six feet tall, Arabian or Syrian, dark face, scar on nose, last seen near Delaney mansion wearing long black robe from shoulder to ankle. Wanted for the murder of Gregory Delaney."

Grant's eyes narrowed. So the assassins had got through the guard after all, and killed Gregory De-

laney! That made the charge against him accessory in murder. It meant, too, that the inspector would check his arrival at headquarters, and, when he failed to show up, would broadcast an alarm for him, too.

He shot the police car to the curb near his apartment, hurled out the cop, who was mumbling dazedly now, and shoved him into the private elevator, which lofted them to his penthouse.

Once in his home, Grant whistled gaily, mixed a sleeping draught which he forced down Judson's unwilling throat.

Judson spluttered angrily: "You'll pay for this. What are you trying to do, poison me?"

Grant said grimly: "No. Just shutting your mouth for a while."

He shoved the policeman into a chair and stood guard over him until his head began to nod in sleep. Then he swiftly unlocked the handcuffs, took Judson out of his uniform and put him in Grant's own bed, handcuffed him there.

"Sweet dreams!" Grant muttered, and carrying the uniform, strode into his study where he phoned his office to get the report on the check-up of Stinson planes.

His assistants had located a dozen in use at sunset the previous day, but seven had been headed in the wrong direction. Three others were too far west and of the rest, one had been on the way to Washington, and the other over the Big Smoky Mountains of eastern Tennessee.

Grant said: "Have Cary and Daniels go immediately to Newark airport and get the Lockheed ready for me."

He hung up, hurriedly donned the police uniform. The trouser legs were a bit short, and there was too much room around the waist. Grant smiled grimly.

"Too bad Judson can't admire me in his uniform."

He hustled into the bedroom for a last look at the sleeping policeman.

He switched on the light and spotted the white flutter of a piece of paper on the man's chest. Grant sucked breath between his teeth, crossed the room in a stride and a half and crouched over the note.

The penalty of treachery is death.

Achmed ben Hassan.

He touched the man. He was like stone. Achmed ben Hassan had murdered the policeman, thinking he was Grant!

Grant spun to the window, made a whirlwind search of his apartment and roof and found no one. The murderer had vanished as completely as life had gone from Grant's prisoner on the bed.

Grant's fists clenched. He must, he must find Achmed ben Hassan now, rip the mask from his murdering features! For Judson's death meant an open and shut murder case against Grant.

CHAPTER VII

ACHMED AERIE

GRANT stood for a moment staring down at the stiff body of the man who had died in his stead. A hard, tight, fighting smile lifted his mouth, but his eyes were like brown agate.

He dropped the elevator to the street, sent the police car skittering around a corner and down Fifth Avenue. He switched on the radio again.

Squawks and routine orders came from the instrument as he raced past apartment houses, past shops and office buildings, weaving through a clutter of night traffic.

Then, abruptly, there was a new squawk on the radio: "General Alarm. All cars Manhattan and Bronx, Brooklyn to relay. Terry Grant, well-known adventurer, wanted in the murder of Gregory Delaney, escaped while on way to headquarters with Patrolman Judson."

A word-picture of Grant ran into great detail. His smile was bitter now,

Grant shot down into the noisy rush of Holland Tunnel, over the express highway. The police car and his uniform got him past the toll gate, up to the private hangars of the Newark airport, alight with purple flood lamps.

His low-winged, red Lockheed Orion was outside the hangar with motor idling. One of his men stood beside it, arguing with two men in police uniform. Grant shot the police flivver up beside the Orion. The two policemen turned to him with relief. They were state troopers, Jersey men.

One jerked his thumb over his shoulders. "This bozo has a special dispensation supposed to exempt him from police interference."

Grant growled, "Yeah, he'll lose that now," and stalked across to the side of the plane.

If the operative's pudgy face showed any sign of recognition, Grant could not identify it as such. The man glared at him as sullenly as he had at the two New Jersey officers.

"There's supposed to be two of you," Grant growled. "Where's the other one?"

"None of your damned business," the man growled back at him, and Grant turned to the two Jersey policemen.

"Do you mind holding this bozo? I think the other guy's inside the plane."

The Jersey policeman said, "Sure," seized Grant's man by the shoulders and eased him over to one side. The door of the Orion was closed. Grant jerked it open and, bent over, walked forward. His man sat hunched down in the forward compartment so that he was invisible outside.

As Grant entered, the man whirled and jabbed the nose of a heavy automatic toward his face, recognized Grant beneath the visor of the police cap, and sputtered, "Well, for God's sake, man, what are you doing in that outfit?"

Grant said swiftly: "Get out of that, Daniels."

Daniels eased out of the single cockpit and Grant slid in. His hand jerked the throttle and the Orion belled into movement.

Daniels shouted in his ear: "You're heading down wind!"

Grant's mouth was grim. He nodded slowly, leaned forward and adjusted the propeller pitch to maximum climbing power. A long field, and light load. That would help, but he was taking a big chance with the Orion's small wing area.

Sharp cries outside, drowned in the roar of the motor. The airport starter dashed forward, waving his flag excitedly, pointing to a big Curtis Condor racing nose-on toward the Lockheed.

GRANT kicked the rudder over, reversed it to check, shot down with the wind. A glimpse of the frightened face of the Condor's pilot, then they were gone.

The Orion's tail seemed nailed to the ground. The edge of the field was closer now; beyond it, high-tension power lines stretched their steel-meshed net. Grant's jaw clamped. His eyes were pinpoints. Not a chance of taking off if he turned now. Hell, he couldn't turn now. Too near the edge of the field, going too fast. Daniels was shouting in his ear. He couldn't understand. It didn't matter.

At long last the tail lifted sluggishly. The motor was grinding, laboring. Grant tested the stick. The Orion hopped like an ungainly bird. He heaved on the stick, sent her nose up almost in a stall, nosed down and then almost muscled the Orion into the air as the markers of the field's edge slid past under the tires.

The steel net of wires loomed ahead. The motor labored. Grant's mouth was a grim, white slit. With every nerve of his body he fought to lift the wind-logged ship. The wires flashed toward them. Grant pulled up the nose and waited for the snagging crash. Fractions of seconds dragged past.

Grant blew out breath between tight teeth, whirled the Orion in a steep bank and rode the lift of the wind upward, upward. Clouds at 5,000 feet. Grant dove into them, nosed south. His face relaxing, he leaned forward and switched the lever to maximum speed pitch for the propeller. They'd have a tough time flagging down the Orion now.

He raised his head, jerked a nod at Daniels. "Take her," he shouted. "Wake me when we pass Greensboro."

Daniels' face was strained. He smiled faintly.

"Pretty work," he yelled back and took the wheel.

Grant slipped off the police uniform, drew on tight-legged riding breeches and a flying suit. From weapon racks he selected a heavy automatic, a pair of glasses, and stretched out on the special seats of his Orion to sleep.

Grant woke shortly after dawn, of his own accord, before they had passed over the North Carolina town, and swept the country below with glasses while the Orion followed the path of the Stinson he had spotted from Achmed's aerie. He searched for a high-walled place in which would be Moorish windows covered with iron grille.

IT took twelve hours of flying to find the place, high in the Big Smokies. Tangled virgin forest stretched on all sides of it for miles, but high on the promontory where the big Moorish building sprawled was a dinky landing field.

The Orion could never sit down there, or, having landed, could never take off. Grant doubted that anything but an autogiro could use that field. Grant swiftly strapped on a parachute pack, went forward to Daniels. He shouted:

"I'm going to bail out. Fly across the field. After I jump, hit for Raleigh. Get men to back me up. I've got to get down there so they won't

get away. Whoever you bring better wear parachutes."

Daniels nodded, banked the ship in a slow circle. Grant heaved open the door against wind pressure, stepped off at four thousand feet. He shot down and down and down, and didn't yank the rig ring until he was within 1500 feet of the surface. Even so, a half dozen men spilled out over the field beneath him.

Grant's keen eyes were grim, and he reached up to the shrouds of the parachute, pulled down on one side until air, slipping out from under the bell of the 'chute slid him off to one side of the field into the trees.

Dangerous business, diving into trees that way, but landing on the field meant capture, and the woods would delay those henchmen of Achmed.

His side-slipping had been cleverly done. The men had rushed toward the near end of the field to meet him. By his side-slipping he had sent the 'chute back over the hangar and a hundred yards into the woods. He spotted a small clearing filled with second-growth pine, as close together as quills on a porcupine's back. They broke his landing.

Grant sprawled to the ground, scrambled up unhurt. No time to unbuckle the harness. He snatched out a knife, slashed the shrouds, darted off through the pines. They grew slightly above his head, and the thick, intermingling needles allowed no more than two or three feet visibility.

Once out of the second growth, the forest became park-like, huge, straight pines, whose branches did not begin until fifty feet above the ground. Underfoot a carpet of pine needles, brown and slippery. Difficult woods to hide in.

Grant heard now the crashing of men working through the second growth he had just quitted. He could see the hangars, a dark blotch against the sky. He took out his automatic,

streaked back along the edge of the pines, ran swiftly toward the field again. The soft, needle-carpeted earth gave off no sound.

There were two hangars, and Grant reached the first without having been spotted. He slipped along the side, peered in through the great open doors.

There was no one in the hangar, but there were three, five-passenger cabin autogiros, like huge poised insects with their long rotors. Grant went swiftly to work, dumped a drum of gasoline down to the ground and rolled it slowly across the hangar so the gas covered the ground beneath the 'giros. When most of the gasoline was out of the drum he pushed it slowly toward the doorway, leaving a wet trail. Outside the hangar's door he touched a match to it.

Swift flames streaked across the floor, and, in a few seconds, had wrapped the ships in red and yellow tongues of fire. Grant darted swiftly into the second hangar. No time here for elaborate preparations. He shoved a gasoline drum to the ground beneath the centermost of the three 'giros and wrenched at the gasoline plug.

There were wild shouts in the woods now. Grant dragged down a second drum. The plug stuck. He shot a hole through the drum, dragged it to the door, touched a match to the trail and fled.

He sprinted toward the sprawling building on the hill. It was a veritable castle. The high wall had doorways at regular intervals, and a twisting path ran up the steep slope toward it, thick woods to either side.

Grant plunged into the woods. Those men on the field would have too much fire-fighting to do for a little while to bother him. There was a sudden roar, and Grant whirled in time to see the roof of the hangar lift, the walls fly sideways. Patches of liquid flame spread over the field, flashed into the woods.

THERE were shouts now behind the wall toward which Grant panted through the cover of the woods. Gates flung open and men pounded down toward the field, a full twenty of them.

When no more men had come through the gates for a full minute and a half, Grant crept toward one and through it. Luxurious gardens spread within the wall. Flowering clusters of shrubbery were higher than his head. There was a profuse blossoming of roses and other exotic plants which Grant did not identify.

Abruptly he darted aside, crouched between two huge, spreading bushes of Japanese quince, their thorns prodding him. He had caught a slight movement along the path, and as he crouched a huge Negro came into sight. He was naked to the waist; but his legs were clothed in baggy golden silk, and there were fantastic, brilliant shoes on his feet.

These were not the things Grant noticed. The right hand of the Negro grasped a scimitar with a heavy, curved blade over four feet long. The man's movements were stealthy, and his eyes swung from side to side, searching the shrubbery.

But dusk was filling the garden now, and Grant's clothing was dun-colored. The man, advancing with that long stride, crouched forward with that vicious blade in his hand, passed within five feet of where Grant crouched between the quince bushes.

He went around the corner of the building, and Grant slipped out again and advanced toward the house. Around the third floor ran a shallow balcony, whose arched windows, covered with iron lattice, had been the clew by which Grant had identified the building from the plane.

As he slipped along, searching for some entrance, he heard a soft call and glanced up sharply, gun muzzle pointing with his eyes, to find a girl bending over the railing of the balcony. It was Elandi, his "slave."

Her call was musical, as if she sang. A rope came writhing down from the balcony, and she beckoned with a white hand.

A trap? But why bother? They could easily surround him in the garden. Grant took his gun between his teeth, tested the rope with a tug, and swung upward, hand over hand.

A hoarse shout below him in the garden. He twisted his head. The huge Negro was leaping in great strides across the garden, the scimitar raised.

He quickened his climb, twisted a leg into the rope and grabbed his automatic from between his teeth. The scimitar swished by beneath his feet.

The Negro howled unintelligible things, whirled back the blade again. Grant saw he would throw. His gun spoke, too late. Already the scimitar glittered through the air. But the blade required an expert to throw. It turned in the air. Its hilt struck Grant's hand, knocked the automatic to the earth.

Even while the sword and gun clattered to the ground, the Negro swayed on his feet. He toppled and fell like a redwood tree, mighty even in defeat.

Grant turned back to his climb hauling himself with creaking muscles up the last ten feet. He caught the balcony rail, hauled himself over and—stared into the venomous muzzles of three revolvers.

CHAPTER VIII

ALTAR OF ALLAH

BEHIND those three pistols were the grimly determined faces of three assassins. The girl, after her treachery, had disappeared, and below him in the garden were heard the shouts of other men, returning from fighting the fire in the hangars.

Trapped—completely trapped, and at odds that were completely impossible. He had only one trump now.

These men had no way of escape, now that the autogiros were burned, and field and hillside were clear for the landing of the relief that his operative was speeding in his swift Lockheed Orion.

Play for time was his cue—time was his only salvation. He smiled pleasantly into the muzzles of those three revolvers and said:

“Well, it looks as though you had me.”

One of the men had a short upper lip and buck teeth, and when he spoke, the upper lip was squeezed back and his teeth showed yellow and vicious as a wolf’s. He said grimly:

“Yes. And this time you will not escape!”

He shoved his revolver into his robe, and strode forward, assisting Grant over the balustrade. He leaned over and shouted down to the men below.

“The throne room. Allah summons you all to the throne room.”

The three men closed about Grant. The screen of a window slid aside, and they entered a room luxurious in Persian carpets. They strode along dim halls where Grant’s hard heels echoed through the sly sibilance of slippers, where jeweled lamps cast a lurid glow. Finally heavy, carved doors swung open.

There were twenty men in a semi-circle about the room, but only a sinister silence greeted him. Behind them he could see a low, white-draped, bierlike couch. His three immediate captors took him deliberately to it. At the couch’s head an assassin stood with the huge, heavy scimitar which the Negro had vainly hurled at him.

Two men stepped forward and wordlessly began to strip Grant. He moved his arms unnecessarily, tossed them, offered to do things for the men, to unfasten the buckle of the ’chute harness, anything to play for time. He managed to delay them, but got not one syllable of response.

Finally he stood totally stripped, a leanly muscled, powerful man. A twist of white silk embroidered in gold was bound about his waist. Strong hands gripped his arms suddenly, and almost before he was aware of their intentions, he was spreadeagled upon the white bier.

The man with the huge scimitar strode forward. Grant wrenched his head about, saw that the man was stripped to the waist and that his shoulder muscles bulged with the lift and heft of the blade.

The man stood grimly at the head of the couch, put the tip of the blade on the floor, and leaned on its hilt, his hands almost beneath his chin.

Grant forced his tensing muscles to relax, and calmly began to whistle a little tune. A man’s fist struck across his mouth, and a deep voice boomed out:

“Silence and respect in the room of Allah!”

It was again what Elandi had called, “The Voice of Allah.”

A man began to intone guttural noises, in a language Grant guessed must be Arabian, and the booming voice of Allah made responses. Finally it spoke in English.

“Terry Grant, you are to die, a sacrifice to wipe out your debt to Allah.”

GRANT knew then that the platform on which he lay was an altar. The man with the scimitar moved. Grant’s eyes flashed to him, saw him tense, and lift the big blade. Muscles pulled in the man’s arms and he threw the blade back over his shoulder and then looked toward the wall above the throne, awaiting a signal.

Muscles swelled and corded in Grant’s own arms against the tight grip of his captors. That blade, swishing down, would split him in two, from chest to the top of his head. Grant’s face was drawn, his mouth corners strangely lifted in that narrow fighting smile of his.

There was a sudden clamor at the wooden door, and Grant jerked his head about hopefully. The police? Oh, but not yet. They couldn't have come yet. It was not the police. The doors swung inward suddenly wide and through them rushed the small, white figure of Elandi.

She waved above her head a thin, long knife and ran on swift feet across the floor to the throne and knelt.

"Allah, oh Allah, thy servant craves a boon, a chance to wipe out my disobedience. Let me execute the sentence of death upon this dog."

Men stood angrily over the bent figure of the girl but no one touched her, and all stared at the wall above the throne, waiting, waiting for the decision of Allah upon the invasion of this girl.

Grant could not see her where she crouched, as he lay with his head straight back away from the throne. But the man with the scimitar had not moved. He stood still with his arms tensed back, ready to swish down with that murderous blade.

The voice of Allah was slow in answering, but finally its tone boomed out: "It is permitted."

The girl, with a glad little cry, sprang up and ran across to Grant's side. She was a little thing, and her eyes were warm, staring at Grant. There was no hostility in them, only friendliness as for a moment her velvet-soft eyes strayed up and down the long, lean length of young Grant's nearly naked body.

She was dressed as she had been when Grant had first seen her, jeweled plates upon her breast and flowers in her hair. She raised the blade above her head and the voice of Allah broke in again rather hurriedly:

"No, no, not that way. And not the scimitar. Let it be the Stone Death."

The words fell like ice on Grant's heart. He saw movement and a man strode up beside the altar with a small, glittering needle in his right hand. But even as he came near, the

girl's dagger flashed down, a gleam of light, striking not Grant but the man who held his arm.

The man uttered a strangled cry and fell, and Grant sprang from the altar, fighting the man who gripped his other arm, and wrenching free. He felt a small hand upon his arm, and the blood-stained knife of Elandi was thrust into his hand.

He charged the man with the scimitar, wrenched the huge blade from him, grasped it by the handle, and whirled. The blade was superbly balanced, its edge like Swedish razors. Two men fell at its first whistling sweep, a man with a knife dropped to his knees and thrust up under its swing.

Grant chopped down and the man's arm was severed at the shoulder. The scimitar flashed on, a glittering flame in the hands of the naked white giant. There was a shrill scream behind him, and Grant with a whirling sweep of his blade to clear away his assailants, turned to see that Elandi had been seized by the man with the needle.

His hand was on her throat, and her small body was arched backward on the altar, and the needle was going slowly toward her breast.

The scimitar slashed, sliced through needle and hand and the man whirled back, blood spouting from the severed arm upon the girl. The voice of Allah boomed out suddenly:

"Down, down, all of you. So that I may slay this dog."

THIS time there was no doubt about the location of the voice. It came from behind the throne. Grant realized instantly that he would be helpless out of the protecting, close-pressing ranks of his attackers.

The voice of Allah had hardly ceased, the men were just dropping to their knees, when he sprang forward, mounted the throne dais and struck violently against the wall behind it with the heavy hilt of his

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sword. It gave, and Grant drew back and hurled himself against the same spot. A door pivoted beneath his thrust.

Darting into the opening, Grant dived sideways. Gun flame lanced at him from the dark, a lean hand thrust out between dark curtains and Grant swung the scimitar back and hurled it. His years at juggling stood him in good stead. It flew strong and true, and the revolver clattered to the floor.

Grant charged after the flying weapon and sprang upon the man behind the curtains. He was large and powerful and despite his wounded hands, gashed by the scimitar's blade, struggled violently against Grant.

They fought in almost total darkness, the only light filtering through the narrow door that Grant had forced. The heavy curtains swirled about them. A fist caught Grant in the face and hurled him violently back. He writhed aside as the man thumped down with his knees on the spot where Grant had lain. Grant jumped up and sprang on the man's back, linked his arms beneath his, and strained back.

"Give up, you fool," he grated out, "or I'll break your arm."

Sounds that might or might not have been words issued from the man. Grant, his grip on the man's arm rendering him helpless, dragged him toward the narrow door.

If he could show these assassins their conquered master, they might surrender, save the police a terrific struggle when they arrived.

Dragging the captive along, Grant became conscious of a stony chill in the man's arms. They were rigid and hard beneath his grasp, and Grant, with a sudden feeling of nausea at his stomach, dropped him to the ground.

He hit solidly and in the light of the small doorway Grant saw that his position remained entirely unchanged, that his face was twisted hideously with fear.

Grant put his hand slowly to the man's throat, and it was cold, as rigid as stone, and suddenly Grant understood. The blade of the scimitar that had gashed through the hypodermic needle about to kill the girl, had slashed the man's hand immediately afterward! Poetic justice. The master of the Stone Death had died by the Stone Death, and from the virus intended for one of his victims!

Grant whirled and grabbed up his scimitar again, dashed for the door and saw the girl's small back in it. He peered over her shoulder and saw that she grasped an automatic and that she held at bay five or six assassins. Many others lay dead in a welter of blood where the scimitar had slashed, and others lay dead with bullets.

Clamor at the doors again. They swung wide and men in uniform, with levelled guns, dashed in. Grant stepped out into the open past the girl, his arm about her shoulders, and recognized Daniels at the head of the charge.

"Fine work, Danny!" he called.

Then he saw that the men behind Daniels were New York police.

"Danny," he said, "you didn't get all the way back to New York?"

Danny laughed and said: "No, they captured me in Raleigh, and I brought them along here to capture you."

Inspector Littleman strode forward, his keen dark eyes puzzled. He glanced at the shambles on the floor, to the girl with the gun in her hand, and the tall giant with the dark-stained scimitar.

"It looks as if we'd have to add to those murder charges against you," Littleman growled.

GRANT took two swift strides forward, and poised the scimitar. He grinned like a boy.

"Want to fight?"

The police officer growled something unintelligible, and demanded:

"What the hell is this business, anyway?"

Grant said quietly, "Did you ever hear of Hassan ben Sabbah?" and Littleman growled, "No."

Grant said rapidly:

"He was called the Old Man of the Mountain. He lived in the tenth century and organized bands of assassins whom he tricked into believing they had gone to heaven for a few days, giving them everything that the Mohammedan expects to find in heaven.

"Then he gave them another dose of hasheesh and sent them back to earth in his service. If they served him they went back to heaven when they died, and heaven to them had been such a delightful place that they did not hesitate to die at his command.

"Apparently this lad, Achmid ben Hassan, the same bloke these boys called Allah, had convinced them by means of a similar trick. You'll notice that all his servants are Syrian. I deduced this from his treatment of me when he kidnaped me and brought me to this castle originally. That was where I was just after Myra Hawks was murdered.

"He was using his assassinations to exact a tribute from the wealthy, just as Hassan ben Sabbah in the old days exacted money from the princes of the world."

"Yeah?" said Littleman. "Well, where is this guy Achmed?"

Grant's smile went from his face. He ducked his head toward the narrow opening behind him. "Achmed's in there, dead."

"Well, haul him out and let's see him."

Grant said, "Haul him out yourself. He died of the Stone Death that he was accustomed to inflict upon other people."

"And what is this Stone Death?" Littleman demanded.

Grant said: "I haven't had any chance to puzzle out the exact nature of the injection he gave, but what he

accomplished was to set up a condition of rigor mortis in the living body, stopping circulation of blood and stiffening the muscles so that the body became like stone.

"Cyanide poisons, especially prussic acid, cause early rigor mortis, often within an hour after death. Sometimes, in case of violent exertion, this occurs even sooner. Achmed undoubtedly used a cyanide in some terrible new form, ferreted out with his deep knowledge of the East and its secret poisons. He induced rigor mortis in the living body, turning people almost literally, to stone.

"This business of death creeping from the feet upward was nothing unusual. In deaths by poison, especially those that effect the heart, the feet and hands always go numb first."

Littleman grunted. "You're so wonderful," and shouldered past Grant. "If you're squeamish about hauling out this Achmed guy, I'll do it."

He stepped in through the narrow entrance and flashed on his light. Grant heard a low curse of amazement and stepped in with him where the white light of his flash bathed the dead face of Achmed ben Hassan. The light showed a leonine white head and a face with the bristling white mustache.

"Dammit," cried Littleman, "it's Colonel Hawks himself!"

Grant smiled grimly and said:

"I'm not surprised. When Hawks hired me, his worry about his so-called daughter seemed vaguely unreal to me, and at his house I learned Myra had insisted on me; and she tried to tell me of some suspicion, but she didn't get very far with it because Hawks wouldn't leave us alone.

"Then when the assassins came they opened the door with six locks on it as easily as I could open my own front door if I had a latch key. These men are human beings, and unless they had assistance—such as Hawks giving them the keys—they could not have opened the door. He must have

feared his ward would give him away and took this means to kill her and avert suspicion from himself.

"Another thing that convinced me was the fact that Hawks was very slow in answering when I shouted for help while battling the assassins in Myra's room. Then, too, his house was full of relics of Asia, a tip-off in itself."

Grant felt a small warm hand on his arm and turned to find the brown soft eyes of Elandi looking up into his.

"Am I forgiven, lord?" she asked Grant.

He threw an arm about her shoulders.

"Forgiven? Yes, child—but I'll never forget."

But Elandi did not know that Terry Grant also meant that he would never forget Myra Hawks, the gorgeous woman who had been held in damnable slavery by the leonine-headed murderer who had posed as her father. Grant made up his mind to take a long trip, soon.

