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Contents for January, 1928

Cover Design	C. C. Senf
Illustrating a scene in "The Gods of East and West"	
The Eyrie	6
A chat with the readers	
Haunted Island	Wilfred Blanch Talman
Verse	8
The Gods of East and West	Seabury Quinn
A tale of Jules de Grandin—the Gods of East and West wage terrific battle over the soul of Idoline Chetwynde	
The Feathered Serpent	Walter Carrington
The Gray Death slithered through the ruins of the Temple of Xupa, where Cyrene Cortelyou fought against the Thing	
Folk of the Dark	N. L. Brewer
Verse	38

(Continued on Next Page)

(Continued from Preceding Page)

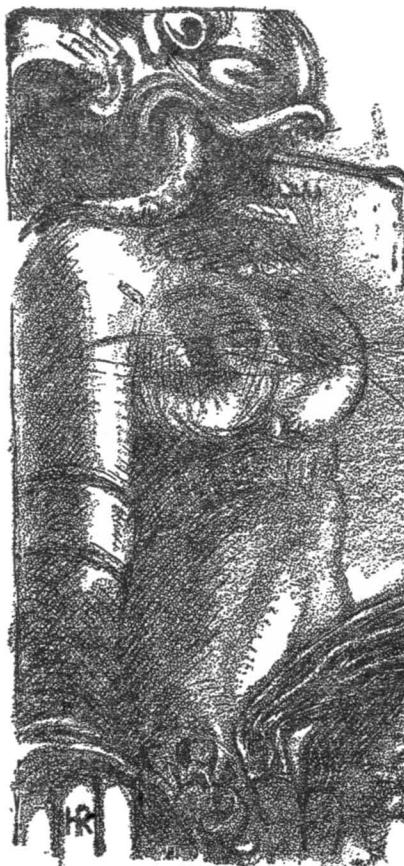
While the Lamps Hissed	Arthur W. Davenport	39
<i>Adallah the Arab coveted the immense diamonds that were the teeth of the idol of Dooryha, but they were guarded well</i>		
The Garret of Madame Lemoyne	W. K. Mashburn, Jr.	44
<i>The black slave of Madame Lemoyne nursed a hatred that not even death could kill—a ghost-tale of New Orleans</i>		
The Giant World (Part 1)	Ray Cummings	49
<i>A three-part weird-scientific serial—a distant world—giants growing into largeness unfathomable—every adventures</i>		
In Amundsen's Tent	John Martin Leahy	72
<i>A horror lurked in Roald Amundsen's tent at the South Pole—an utterly abominable and terrifying monstrosity</i>		
The Riders of Babylon	Robert E. Howard	84
<i>Verse</i>		
The Golden Whistle	Eli Colter	85
<i>Suclivor came from a far planet, searching the worlds for a soul that he could draw to him by atomic vibration</i>		
The Chant of the Grave-Digger	Robert S. Carr	104
<i>Verse</i>		
The Time-Raider (Conclusion)	Edmond Hamilton	105
<i>A four-part serial about an entity that sweeps back through time to seize its victims</i>		
The Bone-Grinder	Wilford Allen	123
<i>A weird story of the frightful thing that crushed the life out of those who came within its toils</i>		
Weird Story Reprint		
Metzengerstein	Edgar Allan Poe	128
<i>The great horse of the Counts Berlitzing galloped, full-tilt, into the flames, bearing Metzengerstein to his doom</i>		
Folks Used to Believe		
Conceptions of Deity	Alvin F. Harlow	134
<i>Curious concepts of God held by our ancestors</i>		

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WHILE THE LAMPS HISSED

by Arthur W. Davenport

"The deadly drug was coursing through his veins like molten metal."

ON a sweltering night Adallah, the Arabian, made his way to one of the foul dens which are to be found scattered throughout the cities of the East. In such places as these the slaves of the drug vice forget for a time their troubles, the climate and the horrible odors associated with the Orient, to float away amidst the cloudy dreams of opium smoke to a prolonged and lazy stupor. Here congregate the scum of the earth, and each has something of interest to tell the others. They are the news markets of the Oriental underworld, where every criminal seems to know the record of his neighbor and what it is he most wishes to hear.

The quest of news rather than that

of hashish had brought Adallah to this place. The greater part of the assemblage were, at the time of his entrance, engaged in gambling and drinking at the many little tables placed about the room. Nodding to those whom he recognized, the Arab made his way to where a rude bar cut off one corner of the room. Behind this a Eurasian woman, garbed in a costume strangely reminiscent of several neighboring countries, smiled welcomingly as she placed a glass of liquor before him.

"Ah, little moon-flower," laughed Adallah, taking a string of pearls from a pouch he wore at his belt, "I found these about the throat of a base-born Englishman's wife and brought them for thee. Accept this

token of my regard, O lotus blossom, for always thy image is in my memory."

He dropped the necklace carelessly upon the rum-stained bar while he gulped down at a draft the contents of the glass.

"My lord is always gracious," she smiled softly, picking them up and clasping them at the back of her neck. "But here comes a mountaineer to quench his thirst."

The fellow, a ragged, dirty-looking individual, approached, and throwing several coins down, demanded immediate attention. It may have been the loudness of his voice or merely chance that caused a second mountaineer to turn his eyes upon the speaker. As the blustering fellow set his glass down, Adallah imagined that he saw his eyes narrow warningly. The approaching peasant stopped short in surprise, then turned his back and resumed his previous occupation.

Adallah continued to watch the man at the bar suspiciously. Presently the fellow turned to him with a friendly air and asked if he would care to indulge in a pipe with him. To this Adallah assented cheerfully, knowing that under the influence of opium the stranger might disclose the information which would satisfy his curiosity.

The Eurasian led them through a little back door into a low-ceiled room, the walls of which were lined with bunks. Privacy might be obtained for the occupants by pulling down a roll of matting which, when hanging from the ceiling to the floor, shut them in like a perfect room. Several dirty mats were cast about the floor, and in one corner a pile of packing-cases, empty opium tins and rubbish rose almost to the cobweb-festooned rafters. A single lamp lighted the gloomy room with its sickening odor of mingled drugs and perspiring Orientals. Several of the

bunks contained smokers in various degrees of unconsciousness.

All these things the eyes of Adallah took in at a glance, when his companion took him by the arm, and said, "Let us occupy these two mats upon the floor, O my brother; it will enable us to have a better opportunity to converse until we reach the Nirvana of the opium-smoker. Wilt thou agree?"

"Most assuredly," nodded Adallah. "We shall smoke here, Zara." He addressed the Eurasian by her name for the first time, pointing at the two grimy mats.

As Zara could find only one pipe not in use, she was obliged to search among the lethargic smokers until she found one still in the lips of a Mongolian who had recently slipped off into the land of fantasy. She then opened a tin of opium and loaded the pipes with an ease gained from long practise. Lighting them, she handed one to each man, while a smile played about her carmine lips.

"Soon my lord will be dreaming of me, his slave Zara," she cooed in her caressing voice. Then, saluting Adallah, Zara withdrew to the front room.

THE Arab pretended to place the pipe-stem in his mouth, lying back as if obtaining the greatest satisfaction. In the gloom he could distinguish the outline of his strange companion and was glad that it was dark enough to make close observation impossible. It made his pretended smoking easier. They spoke at intervals, Adallah noticing that the mountaineer's voice was becoming dreamy and sometimes incoherent, until:

"I have a strange tale, O my friend," intoned the Arab's companion, attempting to refill his pipe while his head nodded continually upon his breast. "I shall tell it to thee, for I know well that thou art a brave man. Harken: We can become

immensely wealthy. I know where there are diamonds that will buy a kingdom for each of us; and when we have finished our pipes, we shall go forth and seek these riches."

In a broken manner the fellow began to tell of a certain idol of Doorgha in a temple four days' march north from there. He revealed the astonishing fact that the teeth of the idol were made of immense diamonds. The stones had decorated the mouth for hundreds of years without having been stolen. Each one of the gems was worth a fortune. All this the fellow told him, and then suggested that after they had enjoyed their pipes they would go together and procure these diamonds for themselves.

"We shall have very little trouble in obtaining them," he added, "for the people living about there are so superstitious that they have never made an attempt to rob the temple; consequently the stones are left unguarded. But we shall—"

Here his voice trailed off into a drowsy murmur while the pipe slipped from his lips to the floor and he lay perfectly motionless. For a while Adallah conned the comatose mountaineer until he was sure that he was entirely under the effects of the drug. Then he arose softly and made his way from the reeking room and out of the place to the street without the occupants noticing him leave. It was the work of but a short time to obtain the directions necessary to reach the temple of Doorgha and begin preparations.

Nature had equipped Adallah with the desire to pilfer places of worship. He felt the faith of an orthodox Jew while ravishing a mosque, or the fanaticism of a Mussulman at sight of a rich Indian temple. With a conscience of such flexibility he was not deterred by the religious scruples that prevented others from profaning holy things.

Lean, muscular and of average height, Adallah was a typical son of the desert. A gray turban about his head and knee breeches composed his entire costume. His weapons were a naked simitar and an Italian stiletto, for he scorned firearms. They were too noisy.

Thus attired, he appeared four nights later in a little khan situated but a short distance from his place of destination. There he made further inquiries regarding the temple, saying that he was on a pilgrimage to that shrine to fulfil a vow.

"Thou hast come at an excellent time, my son," smiled the old man who acted as host. "It is the time of sacrifice to the great Goddess of Death, and if thou wilt tarry with us for a few days thou shalt see the victim Doorgha sends."

"Doorgha sends a victim?" repeated Adallah half-amusedly.

"Hou! It began many years ago when those eaters of carrion, those Arabs, came into our country to spread their false religion by the sword. A band of them made their way up here and destroyed a temple of Doorgha and then fled. When the priests who were left alive returned, they took a vow of vengeance. Every fifty years they slay an Arab upon the altar before Doorgha. The English have made it against the law to abduct people and kill them, so it is difficult to sacrifice the followers of the lying prophet without being found out. However, our great Goddess has always provided a sacrifice for the occasion."

It struck Adallah that it was the irony of fate which had sent him, an Arabian, to despoil this very idol. At the thought a grim smile crossed his wolfish countenance.

SOME hours later Adallah was standing upon a slight eminence overlooking the temple of Doorgha, a black blotch unevenly outlined

against the surrounding landscape, and enveloped in the gray fog which was covering the lowlands. There was no light visible from the ghostly walls. The place lay in deathly silence, as if the spirits of those who had erected its massive walls were the only ones that kept watch and ward over it. The throbbing hum of the insects of the night was all that disturbed the vast solitude.

He advanced so cautiously toward the temple that he made not the slightest sound. He moved like a wraith in the ghastly mist beneath the pale crescent moon, while an apparent miasma of death from the poisonous tarn was wafted to him on the night wind. When at length he halted, it was at a point where the shadows were deepest beneath the wall of the temple, and there he stood listening intently.

He heard only the whir of a beetle as it sped past him; there was nothing to betray the presence of any wakeful Brahmin. It was about a quarter of an hour ago that the temple gong had sounded the beginning of the second watch, and the priests retired from the inner chamber to their respective cells. Yet Adallah felt a premonition of impending evil in this silent scene; every sense was aware of it. It was as the calm before the storm.

Still preserving the utmost caution, he passed along the side of the building, peering this way and that until he came to a small postern, long unused. With the stealth and cunning of a leopard he forced the archaic barrier, to be greeted by the darkness of Erebus from within. His sense of touch alone was his guide.

Noiselessly he journeyed along the passage which now ran level, feeling certain that it was the way which led to the Holy of Holies or inner shrine where for so long had safely dwelt the object of his rapacious quest—the twelve great diamonds. Tonight

came the master thief, bolder than the entire band of forty thieves and more subtle than Morgiana into whose snare they fell. It was not the zeal of the hired Afghans which protected the stones—rather it was superstitious awe.

Feeling his way, he ascended a flight of narrow stone steps worn hollow by the soles of countless feet in ages past. Between massive granite walls the way led, turning abruptly to the right, then upward again. Darkness almost tangible enveloped him like a shroud.

Yet the exploit seemed so easily accomplished that it began to lack all excitement. Were it not for the immense value of the gems, the Arab's vanity would not have allowed him to undertake the task. To one who had removed the so-called *Mohur Solimani* (Seal of Solomon) from under the watchful eyes of the Argus-like guardians of the Kaaba, the present task was simplicity itself.

With every sense alert, he opened the door before him a tiny crack that he might peer into the room. The chamber into which he found himself gazing seemed, to his eyes which were accustomed to the dark, to be brilliantly illuminated. But his goal was attained—beyond lay the sanctuary of Doorgha. Through the partly opened door he caught sight of the gorgeous furnishings, though no sign of occupation by human beings.

Emboldened by this evident though expected good fortune, he swung back the door entirely and surveyed the room. No indication of the slightest vigilance being apparent, Adallah crossed the chamber to a large door opposite, believing it to be the usual means of entrance. There he listened to make certain that all was well beyond. The sound of a guard's stertorous breathing came to him while he dropped the cumbersome bolt into place. He did not doubt that he would have been safe had he

trusted to the habitual inertia of this overfed watcher, but he never took unnecessary risks. . . . The guard ceased breathing.

COMING to mid-chamber, Adallah stood gazing at the idol, whose horrible lips formed a frame for the scintillating teeth. Farther back in the cavity the forked tongue of brass reflected balefully the radiance of the precious stones. With the eyes of a connoisseur, the Arab stood admiring the luxurious surroundings. From the carved walls to the richly embroidered curtains behind the figure he let his eyes wander amidst a very orgy of extravagant ornamentation. Later, the golden lamps suspended from the ceiling caught his attention because of the peculiar hissing made by the flame as it burned. And this eery sibilation was the only sound audible within that hot, bright room.

"By Allah!" he whispered, his attention once more returned to the graven image upon the throne; "to despoil yon idol of the infidels is worthy the highest rewards of paradise."

But Adallah did not immediately possess himself of the jewels. He continued to view them from various angles and at a distance. The very sight of the stones sent a thrill of anticipation through his rapacious being. The indulgence in this form of self-torture delighted him. Nor did he feel the need for haste.

The thief even began to calculate the price he would demand in the distant marts of Ispahan or Bagdad, where he would not be recognized. And so he continued to amuse himself. He went so far as to philosophize upon the foolishness of men in storing up great wealth in temples where it benefits no one, while many thousands of people have only the bare necessities of life.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

Three times the brazen ringing of the temple gong was heard. Its discordant sound vibrated through the large chamber as it came from the remote parts of the temple. The echoes seemed to die off in little waves in the dusky loftiness of the ceiling.

Adallah stood as if transfixed. The flickering lamps caused the surging shadows to point at him like the mocking fingers of Fate.

He realized that the entire band of priests would soon be astir, and he had not procured so much as one diamond. But an ability to think quickly and clearly had served to extract Adallah from many an apparent cul-de-sac; nor did it fail him now. He knew that the door was bolted, and, being strong, it would prevent their breaking through for at least some time. It would be a little while before they thought of using the postern and could send men around to cut him off. When that did occur to them he hoped to be making his way down the mountain pass. Then, giving vent to an emphatic imprecation, he dashed up the steps of the dais to the feet of the sitting idol. On his way he noticed the altar upon which Doorgha's votaries placed their victims. A hasty glance showed the top of the stone to be covered by an ominous brown stain. Slowly a smile played about the corners of his thin lips. They were looking for an Arab sacrifice; well, he would ravish their idol and then carve the star and crescent in its forehead to show that an Arab had come and held their wretched religion in contempt. The next moment he had mounted into the lap of the statue.

Upon reaching the grinning orifice where lodged the coveted teeth and the dully brazen tongue, Adallah set to work with due haste. After a few moments he forced a setting and dropped the first lustrous gem into the little pouch he wore at his belt.

(Continued on page 138)

While the Lamps Hissed

(Continued from page 43)

To one watching, such a scene would have seemed the height of the bizarre. The thief working silently beneath the glare of the hissing lamps, an actor in a strange pantomime. Perturbing drafts, which seemed to come from nowhere, caused the flames to waver and set the heaving mass of shadows into noiseless commotion. Long blots of blackness came from the darker corners, beckoning or pointing tauntingly at him. The entire chamber seemed strangely astir. It appeared as a turbulent sea.

Frantically Adallah worked while the perspiration rolled down his face in streams. He knew that every second was precious, but the tenth diamond was already his. For a brief instant he paused to listen, then continued with renewed vigor.

Again his hand sought a diamond. It was the last. Then, it happened. A sharp, metallic click—the hidden spring released by the removed tooth sent the brass tongue out with the swiftness of a striking serpent. It pierced the Arab's arm. With a startled cry he drew back. Vainly he sought to steady himself upon the smooth stone legs of the god, but the deadly drug was coursing through his veins like molten metal.

In the brief instant that followed, he was able to regain his consciousness to behold a strange sight. The curtain about the walls had been drawn back, revealing the entire number of Doorgha's attending priests, their eyes filled with malignant hatred as they watched the thief in his struggle. Among those upturned faces Adallah saw one that was familiar. Now he occupied the

(Continued on page 140)

(Continued from page 138)

position of chief priest here in the temple, but was the one who had played the part of a simple mountaineer drugged with opium, revealing a great secret back in the city four nights ago. From their places of concealment these ministers of Doorgha had been watching him ever since he had entered.

A last piercing scream rent the air and the robber tottered backward upon the knees of the statue. His lean brown fingers clutched vainly at nothingness, while his spine bent almost double. He fell and landed athwart the altar below.

Later, the Brahmins gathered about the human sacrifice on the stone, and lifted their voices in solemn chant to the greatness of Doorgha, the Goddess of Death:

"Ho mother! Thou art the ruler of the universe in the reincarnation of Jagannatri. But as a malignant being, the Goddess of Fear, delighting in blood and in the acrid smell of death, thou art Doorgha . . . Doorgha.

"Ho, three-eyed Goddess of horrid form, around whose neck hangs a string of human skulls, a precious pendant!

"Ho, malign image of destructiveness! Listen thou to my mantra!"

Above, the lamps hissed, their flames leapt and fell and the shadows advancing, receding more rapidly, pointed mockingly toward the lifeless thing that had once been the profaner of temples.