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The Altar
of Melek Taos

By G. G. PENDARVES

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The Altar of Melek Taos

By G. G. PENDARVES

A thrilling tale of devil-worship, of the Yezidees, and a beautiful woman who was to be sacrificed on the altar

1. A Dinner in Bagdad

SIR HUGH WILLETT caught sight of his wife's gold-crowned head at the far end of the table, and his lips twitched in a smile as he noted the rapt expression of the gray eyes under their unexpectedly dark brows and lashes. Evidently she was carrying out his instructions to "keep Prince Dena amused" with whole-hearted zeal. The constant steady flame of his adoration for Evadne—so young, and lovely, and gifted—gave a sudden leap in his breast. She was adorable.

"I've never seen Evadne look better, Hugh."

The voice of the Honorable Mrs. Richard Gaunt echoed his own thoughts, and he turned to the well-known writer and autocrat of London society with an almost fatuous beam.

"This climate suits her, suits us both, in fact."

"D'you let her run round with her paint-box here in Bagdad, as she did in Cairo? It's not very safe!"

"Do I let her!" Sir Hugh's face was a study in mock despair. "My dear Mildred, you know Evadne pretty well. Why revert to the obsolete and empty mockery of a husband's authority in connection with Evadne?"

"You're right," laughed his dinner partner. "But, really, I must acknowledge she can be trusted. I've never met a girl with her head screwed on more firmly. The only danger is that it is such an exceptionally charming head. Just

look at the minx now, beguiling that poor man out of his senses. Who exactly is this Prince? I didn't get his name."

"Prince Dena ibn Zodh! That is his usual title. The whole thing is Ca'id Dena al Ilbrahim ibn Azzad ibn Kadr el Amastan ibn Zodh!"

Mrs. Gaunt patted his arm soothingly.

"There, there! I didn't mean to upset you like that, Hughie dear. This is not the time or place for blank verse, you know. What *have* you been drinking?"

"Fact!" replied Sir Hugh. "I wrote it down, and learned it while I was having my bath before dinner."

"It's a marvel you weren't drowned. But tell me seriously, Hugh, what does the creature do, besides looking so excessively haughty, and mysterious, and utterly fascinating? I feel like an *ingénue* at her first party whenever I look at him."

"I'll tell you later," he answered hastily. "My left-hand neighbor seems to be getting restive. She's been a victim to old Doctor Hamdi long enough to know that adventure of his in Damascus off by heart. I must rescue her."

The Honorable Mrs. Gaunt nibbled a few salted almonds thoughtfully, before turning to Sir Hugh's secretary, Hadur. He was an Arab of excellent birth and most scholarly attainments, having been educated at the famous *medersa* at Kairwan. As a young man he had been kidnapped by Touareggs in the Sahara Desert, sold to slave-traders, shipped to Mecca, and been bought in the slave-market there by Sir Hugh Willett, who recog-



"Prince Dena bent down to the lovely face, and his chant sank to a low murmur breathed against her lips."

nized his birth and breeding. Passionately grateful, Hadur had refused to return to his Algerian home, and had attached himself to Sir Hugh as his secretary.

A great friendship had sprung up between the two, which Sir Hugh's recent marriage had not altered. Hadur had merely extended the cloak of his grave protection and friendship to include the wife as well as the husband. The twenty-five years that lay between her and himself (for Hadur was some ten years older than Sir Hugh) made this easy, and Evadne accepted the former's unfailing loyalty as a matter of course. She did not dream of the quite unplatonic devotion that lay beneath the Arab's solemn courtesy, nor did he desire that she ever should

know of it. Hadur was a profound philosopher; his dreams were one thing, his actual life another. He saw to it that they never impinged on one another.

"I AM going to ask you what I've been asking Sir Hugh." Mrs. Gaunt turned to Hadur at last with an abstracted air. "Who and what is this Prince?"

Hadur presented a sphinx-like face to her questioning gaze.

"I regret, Madam, I can tell you nothing."

"Can't, or won't?"

"He is here for the first time as guest," Hadur countered smoothly. "Sir Hugh met him last week, while superintending the excavation of the Daarb Temple."

"Yes?"

"But, that is all, Madam!"

"Nonsense, Hadur." The downright lady was not to be so easily turned aside. "You can't bear the man, and you've been looking like the wrath of Allah ever since the soup. Do please explain."

"I wish I could." Hadur abandoned his tone of light pretense. "I can only say that there is evil in that man beyond comprehension. I see the *Sitt* Evadne by his side, as if she slept within the coils of a rock python. He is entirely devilish."

His companion looked impressed; she was an intimate friend of the house, and trusted Hadur completely.

"What are you going to do?" she demanded, always eminently practical.

Hadur's eyes, under the folds of his ruby-silk turban, lost a little of their melancholy at her manner.

"The Prince is the guest of Sir Hugh," he reminded her.

"Guest! Sir Hugh!" Mrs. Gaunt's snorts of disdain were fortunately drowned by the lively chatter around them. "You know perfectly well that he would make friends with a Bengal tiger if the beast knew anything about the Assyrian empire! I suppose that is the bond that brought them together?"

"The Prince is surprizingly well informed," conceded Hadur.

"Oh, we were just discussing the fall of Babylon," she told Sir Hugh, as the latter relinquished his other neighbor to Doctor Hamdi once more.

"What?" Her host's deep chuckling laugh brought all eyes upon him. "What do you suppose old Hadur and Mildred were talking about?" he asked.

A roar of laughter greeted his reply, and Mrs. Gaunt defended herself ably from the volley of satire that followed.

"Are you getting foundations for your

next novel?" one lady demanded. "Babylon will be a nice little change from modern London, dear."

"Very little change, in reality," retorted the novelist. "Mere superficialities of food and clothing. The morals and manners of the two cities seem singularly alike. What do you say, Prince Dena?"

She appealed across the table as the latter's darkly brilliant face turned in her direction.

"I must confess that my visits to London have not suggested an analogy," he replied in a deferential manner, "probably because I've not had your unique opportunities of studying it. Babylon was different from every other city the world has known, because it drew its power direct from the supreme Source of power."

A puzzled silence greeted this remark. Mrs. Gaunt stole a glance at Hadur's stern, set face, and experienced a quiver of apprehension, reflecting on the violent and sudden nature of Oriental reactions.

"You are going too deep for some of us," Sir Hugh voiced the general opinion. "The philosophy and mysticism of the East are rather too subtle for me, I confess."

Prince Dena ibn Zodh smiled faintly and turned his dark face, with its chiselled features and inscrutable eyes, toward his hostess.

"I perceive that you, as a mystic, are not out of your depth."

Evadne flushed. The poetry she wrote was very much of the mystic order, but she hated talking about it, never published it, and was startled by the Prince's divination of her abiding interest.

"You refer to the perverted use to which the Magi of the Assyrian empire put their gifts!" Hadur gravely interposed, successfully distracting interest from Lady Willett's slight confusion.

"Perverted use!" The Prince's level gaze clashed with Hadur's intent look.

"Surely!" asserted the latter, in the flat gentle voice that heralded his rare anger. "Since these same Magi forgot, or ignored, the mysterious laws of equilibrium which subjugated the universe to their control. Forsaking the law, they played with magic for the delight of king and courtiers, intoxicating them with every sensual joy. They forsook Ormuzd for Ahriman, and brought the Assyrians to the dust."

"So!" Prince Dena paused, a dark flame in his eyes. "You recollect, however, that from ashes sprang the Phenix!"

"And from the dust of Babylon sprang——?" Hadur also paused.

The guests sat in tense silence, as if aware that some tremendous question had been asked. The atmosphere was electric with the antagonism between the two men.

"From the dust of Babylon sprang the Angel Peacock—Melek Taos!"

The Prince raised his hand as he spoke. The candles—burning steadily in their crystal holders down the long table—flared up into high tendrils of flame. The hanging lamps overhead and in the wall-niches blazed with a sudden blue-white radiance. A golden flower-scented mist filled the spacious room; the sound of a reed-pipe, thin and piercingly sweet, drew the listeners' souls from their bodies. There was a perfume of musk and ambergris and roses, the gleam of night-dark eyes, of polished limbs and half-veiled bosoms.

And in Prince Dena's place a young monarch sat, ablaze with jewels and rainbow-tinted silks, who waved a languid hand to tall veiled figures that hovered behind his throne. Even as he waved, the radiant mist dispelled, the candles and lamps burned slow and steadily

again, and the bewildered company sat staring foolishly at one another's familiar faces.

"Who—who are you?" Evadne's slender hand was at her throat, as she turned to Prince Dena. Then, with an uncertain little laugh, she snatched at the conventions.

"Why, you perfectly marvelous man! That's the most wonderful illusion I've ever seen out here! You're a real sorcerer, I believe."

"The devil he is!" muttered old Doctor Hamdi, annoyed at being so completely tricked. "I beg your pardon, Mrs. Fairleigh," he apologized. "But, did you see it all, too, those delightful . . . er-r-r . . . hours?"

"I certainly did," answered the scandalized Mrs. Fairleigh. "You might have warned us we were to be treated to conjuring, Sir Hugh! I strongly disapprove of this sort of thing. It's quite against my principles to allow myself to be hypnotized."

"Don't blame our host," the Prince's amused voice cut in. "It was entirely unpremeditated. Merely an answer to our learned friend here." And he nodded to Hadur.

The secretary did not reply. He had begun to peel a mandarin orange, and his eyes were on his plate.

"Certainly more spectacular than the Indian rope trick," pronounced the Honorable Mrs. Gaunt, endeavoring to recapture her skepticism. "I suppose you wouldn't condescend to explain the mystery, Prince?"

"Not a question of condescension, Madam," he assured her. "It was based on rules whose existence you Westerners deny. The results of magic are obvious to your senses, but the history and derivation of magic you would class with heathen mythology and folk-lore."

The touch of fear on Lady Willett's face, the bewildered look in her eyes, gave her loveliness a lost unearthly air that made Sir Hugh long to rush to her side. Mrs. Gaunt, seeing her dazed condition, did not wait for a signal to rise, but got to her feet, commanded the rest of the women with an imperious gesture, and put her arm through that of her hostess, as they went from the room.

"Dear child, you've got fever! Better take some quinine at once."

"No, Millicent, not fever." Evadne's voice was low and shaken. "I think—I feel there was something quite awful behind that illusion we saw! I simply hated it."

"Darling! You're much too easily impressed by these Orientals. Wait until you've been mixed up with them ten years or so, as I have. You'll learn to take them less seriously. It was clever, very, but not really devastating."

"It was quite awful!" repeated Evadne.

"Certainly it was," Mrs. Fairleigh chimed in as they sank into low chairs in the wide stone gallery that ran round the house. "A most improper thing; these natives have no sense of decency at all."

"WELL, it was a good show tonight, thanks to the Prince. I thought they'd all stay on to breakfast talking about magic, and *djinnees*, and suspended animation, and all the rest of it. Even little Mrs. Fairleigh got wound up."

Evadne nodded, her clear eyes still shadowed by a faint fear.

"But you were as silent as an oyster, old fellow! What got your goat tonight?"

"There must be listeners for those who talk," Hadur answered dryly.

"You weren't listening, you were sulking, you old reprobate! What was it? Did Mrs. Gaunt ride her hobby-horse

about the Meccan pilgrimage? Or does the Prince belong to a tribe of your hereditary enemies?"

"As to that, he is not more my enemy than yours."

Evadne looked vaguely about her for a cigarette, and Hadur was quick to see her need. She stretched out a firm, delicately modelled little hand, and turned it palm upward to look idly at the gold lettering on the cigarette.

"By the hundredth name of Allah!" exclaimed Hadur. "What mark is that?"

He took her hand in his own lean dark fingers, and bent over the soft rosy palm. A faint curious mark was printed there, silver-gray as wood ash.

"Aie!" The exclamation burst from Hadur, as if a mortal agony seized him. "Allah's mercy on us! When was this done to you?"

"Why—how very curious!" Lady Willett stared at the mark with puzzled brows.

"Did the Prince touch you? Think—remember—was it when he worked his magic at the dinner table?"

"Yes. I remember now, I felt a little tingle on my hand when the candles flared up. It was a peculiar pain, and went right through me. I looked at my hand afterward but there was no mark there. I can't feel anything now, but it won't come off—it won't come off!"

She scrubbed at her palm with a shudder of distaste, and showed the mark to Hugh, standing by her side.

"I don't know quite why you and Hadur are making such a fuss." He was tenderly scornful. "You've scraped the skin a little. Come along, I'll put plaster, and ointment, and a large bandage on it, darling, then you'll be happy."

"It is the sign of Melek Taos—the Mark of Power!" Hadur's voice was low and hoarse. "You can do nothing, Sir

Hugh, for the *Sitt Evadne* has been chosen by the Prince to be—*Wa hyat Ullah*, these lips will not utter the words!"

"What do you mean, Hadur?" Sir Hugh was suddenly stern and angry. "Don't you see that you are alarming Evadne? Explain—don't stand there muttering Arabic to yourself!"

"My lord!" It was seldom, indeed, that Hadur used his native speech, and a chill of fear touched the other's heart at the profound solemnity of Hadur's voice and manner. "My lord! It is wiser to tell thee at the outset what great evil hath befallen the *Sitt Evadne*. It is so grave and overwhelming a disaster, that ignorance would be the last extremity of unwisdom. That mark is the mark of Melek Taos—the Angel Peacock—the symbol of that bright Prince of evil, whose rule ended, temporarily, at the fall of Babylon."

"If I didn't know you for a strict Mohammedan, I'd say you'd been drinking," Sir Hugh interrupted, frowning. "What has Evadne to do with the fall of Babylon? What in hell—excuse me, darling—what on earth is an Angel Peacock?"

"You were right in saying hell," replied Hadur. "The Angel Peacock is the symbol for the devil, a *shaitan*, the ageless evil which men have worshipped from the beginning of time."

Evadne looked with fascinated horror at her hand.

"It is getting plainer all the time," she gasped. "Look, there are wings, a head! It is a bird! More like an eagle, or a vulture, than a peacock."

Both men bent over her hand. The silvery-gray mark was deepening to a dull black, and, as Evadne turned her hand this way and that, it shimmered with gleaming opalescent hues.

"It is very beautiful—very!"

Hadur turned on her with a desperate terror.

"Beautiful! Accursed, you mean! You must not be fascinated by it. Cover it up; you must not let that mark work on you as the Prince intends."

Sir Hugh drew her to sit beside him on a divan close by, putting his own hand over the strange mark, and holding Evadne within the shelter of his arm. His instinct and training prompted him to make light of the whole thing; he did not want his wife to be frightened, and he had always made a habit of resolutely turning his back on the numerous occult phenomena which he encountered in the East. Not that he blundered by showing the natives his complete disbelief in their many superstitions, with the exception of Hadur, but he cherished the belief that nothing supernatural could, or did, exist.

Something deeper than either instinct or training stirred in him now. With a quite inexplicable hatred he hated to see that glittering mark on Evadne's hand. Some fear, ancient and primeval as the foundation of the world, began to trouble him. Over dim unsuspected pools of memory, an old and terrible wisdom moved with portentous shadow.

"Tell us all you know, or think, or suspect," he asked Hadur.

The Arab bent his head gravely, and sat down opposite the pair.

2. *The Very Voice of Fire*

"I WILL give you the facts, as I know them," began Hadur. "Hear me out, however incredulous and repellent you find them."

His audience nodded agreement, Sir Hugh with a sinking heart.

"Prince Dena ibn Zodh is High Priest of the tribe known as the Yezidees. These people are devil-worshippers, and have been for many centuries. In the time of

Shaikh Adi, their chief exponent, the Yezidees bulked largely as a terrible and dangerous sect. They have a sacred Black Book called *Al Yalvah*, and in the Thirteenth Century reached their zenith as a ruling, influential power of evil. Since that time their power steadily declined, but the old reputation clung to them, and Jews and Moslems and Christians alike despised and hated them.

"In reality, until quite recently, they had become a perfectly harmless peasant tribe, whose communities lie scattered in the hills northeast of Bagdad, and in other countries such as Kurdistan, Armenia, and Persia. They practised a few rites and ceremonies grown harmless and unmeaning during the passage of time. They adhered to a few superstitions, such as never wearing the color blue, and never speaking of the devil by that name. The *Shaitan* they worship is symbolized for them in the form of a peacock. A marvellously wrought bejewelled bird represents their god to the tribe, and is kept in some secret sanctuary. When referring to their devil ruler, they call him Melck Taos, or Angel Peacock."

Evadne looked down at her hand, but her husband closed it almost fiercely within his own, and drew her closer to him.

"Melek Taos is something akin to Lucifer, only that the Yezidees think he will return in time to his celestial sphere, and that he rules this earth, meantime, by the direct command of Allah. Until recently, in spite of these strange beliefs, the Yezidees lived normally honest, decent lives. Their religion was a mere shell of the old faith, Melek Taos a focus for their instinct to worship. The old unspeakable sacrifices and horrible perversions of human attributes were completely forgotten."

"And the Prince, what has he to do with all this?" asked Sir Hugh.

"Everything! He has revived the old infamous worship in its entirety, every custom and sacrifice and obscenity of the devil-worship of the dark ages. Melek Taos, from being more angel than devil, is now utterly and wholly devilish. His worshippers indulge in every form of beast-like lust, and unnamable orgy. Torture, sacrifice, the bridal rights of the High Priest and other abominations have been fully re-established."

Hadur looked hesitatingly at the young couple, his eyes haunted and tragic.

"There is worse, much worse to come," he went on. "These things are the mere trappings and superficialities of the devil-worshippers under the new regime of Prince Dena."

"Good God, man!" exclaimed Sir Hugh. "No human being could do worse than this, surely!"

"Human being? Well, yes, as far as his body of flesh and blood is concerned, he is human." Hadur spoke slowly and heavily. "But the Prince has learned a power and a control that set him as far apart from human life, thought, and experience, as a great scientist is removed from the organic life beneath his microscope, or on his dissecting-table.

"You are angry, alarmed, bewildered. It is natural; yet I beg you to remain calm while I try to make clear what will bewilder you still more. These Yezidees were disciples of the false Zoroaster in the past; their ancestors treasured remnants of knowledge and power from the days of long-forgotten kingdoms—lost in the mists of time even when the Assyrians ruled. But these remnants of power perished and were buried beneath the stones of Babylon. The last secrets of Zoroaster vanished in the general holocaust.

"The true Zoroaster, born six thousand years before Plato, according to many savants, learned the great principles that control the universe. He, and his Magi, held the elements in the hollow of their hands. Above all things, they learned the secret and occult force that governs fire. Electricity was subject to them, and answered to their control as a horse answers to bit and bridle.

"They learned, through long discipline and terrible ordeals of purification, to liberate the will entirely from the senses, until they could hear the Very Voice of Fire, until they could focus the universal fire—the Astral Fluid that radiates from every sphere in the universe—and direct it as a weapon or a defense when they pleased.

"The Voice of Fire taught them to become seers and prophets, to impose any thought or feeling upon the multitude, to make themselves visible or invisible at will, to communicate with other Magi at the far ends of the earth."

"How?" Sir Hugh questioned harshly.

"By means of huge power-houses where the electric fluid was stored—seven great towers which stretched across the continent of Asia from Arabia to Tibet. These towers have long since crumbled into dust, but Prince Dena has erected a new one here in the hills somewhere north of this city. And I have information from those who work for me in this matter, that other towers are being built in Persia, Afghanistan, and Mongolia.

"Here, not twenty miles from Bagdad, the Prince rules with all the absolute sovereignty of the Magi of the Assyrian Empire. He has protected his Temple and Palace with the fire-mist and thunder clouds of the priests of Babylon. He has diverted the rivers which flooded and destroyed the old Yezidee altars. He has built his tower over these same altars, and

there the living flame burns night and day."

"How have you learned all this? You've been with me for years, and I've never heard a word of Prince Dena. I knew the Yezidees existed, but that was all. Have you seen the tower, the altar, and all the rest of it?"

"When you journeyed to Europe with the *Sitt*, and left me here in Bagdad, I met a man whose daughter had been sacrificed to Melek Taos by the Prince himself. I may not betray her name—it was a great one and very honored here in Bagdad. Her father has great learning and greater courage. By an accident I stumbled on his secret purpose to avenge his daughter, and since then he and I have worked together. In disguise this man has visited the Temple, joined in the worship, and never rests now in his plans to destroy the Yezidees root and branch. But so far——"

He made an eloquent gesture of despair.

"I am not quite clear about the true and the false Zoroastrians." Evadne's face was pale, but her eyes were intent and steady, her mind absorbed by Hadur's words. "And the Prince himself, is he a true Magus?"

"He was," replied Hadur. "It is that which makes him so unassailable now. He passed through all the sternest tests and ordeals. He became an Adept. He learned all the occult mysteries that control the elements. He heard the Very Voice of Fire, and only death can rob him of his power now, although he has turned it to base and unworthy uses. The Fire he controls will destroy him utterly at last, as it destroyed Sardanapalus on his throne in Babylon. Meantime—he rules!

"I have told you all, *Sitt!*" Hadur met the girl's steadfast eyes. "I have told you

because ignorance would expose you to greater risk. You must understand completely the kind of danger that threatens you."

"I know, I understand, Hadur."

Evadne felt her husband's hand tremble on her own, and turned to him quickly. His angry puzzled look touched her profoundly.

"Darling, don't worry! This is the Twentieth Century, and we are in Bagdad, not Babylon. I think Prince Dena is a terrible man, I felt it from the first moment we met. But he'll have a hard time to get me into his temple, with all his magic and mysteries! Don't look at me as if I were sitting in a tumbrel on the way to the guillotine. Remember, we're in the East, where one expects all sorts of things to happen."

Sir Hugh's gloom visibly lightened.

"You're an absolute wonder, really you are!" And Hadur's flashing glance confirmed her husband's admiration. "We'll tackle this thing together, and bring Prince Dena lower than the walls of Babylon itself."

Hadur fingered a cigarette, his eyes lowered. He had failed to convince Sir Hugh, but he felt assured that Evadne's attitude was more or less assumed for her husband's benefit. She was the more intellectual of the two, more inclined to the mysticism of the East, understanding much that lay outside the range of Sir Hugh's strong practical mind, more imaginative and receptive of the older philosophies, and, if more credulous, at the same time more subtle and flexible in her thought.

Meantime he saw her glance down at her hand, and the question he dreaded followed promptly: "And the mark, Hadur?"

"It is the mark that the High Priest sets upon his chosen. You are the woman

whom he has destined to be offered to Melek Taos on the night of sacrifice, at the rising of the next new moon."

Sir Hugh rose abruptly, his anger suddenly breaking bounds.

"Don't couple Evadne's name with that beastly conjurer's! It's an insult in itself, if only a quarter of what you say is true. It is my fault that she has been exposed to his presumption. I was a fool to have been taken in by him in the first place. I shall see that he never comes near her again, confound him! That mark can be removed by caustic, or electricity. I'll take her to a doctor tomorrow."

Hadur watched the couple go. Evadne's smile to him, over her shoulder, was particularly gentle and affectionate, and the Arab's eyes were dim as he watched her golden head and cloudy draperies disappear down the long corridor without.

"Allah have her in his keeping! To save her I would burn in Gehenna for a thousand years. To save her! . . ."

3. *Vau Ruach Addonai!*

FOR a few days, Sir Hugh, anxious to prevent any chance that might bring Evadne into contact with Prince Dena again, refused to go away from the city, or even to stay more than an hour or two away from his wife. But as the days passed uneventfully, the thought of his workmen in the Euphrates valley began to worry him. They had reached a critical point in a most important job, when the Tomb of Queen Bal-el-Zouka was to be uncovered. It was essential that he should superintend the opening of the inner stone chamber. Only he possessed such experience and expert knowledge as was necessary for such a delicate operation.

Hadur was on the spot, overlooking the workmen, and no doubt could carry out the final diggings as well as he could himself, unless some unexpected difficulty

turned up. It was the chance of this last occurrence that worried Sir Hugh.

His strong common sense and cheerful optimism had quickly thrown off the vague alarm and suspicion he had first entertained with regard to the Prince. As the days quietly succeeded one another the Tomb of Queen Bal-el-Zouka loomed larger, as the Prince faded on his mental horizon.

"I really ought to ride up the valley, and see how things are going," he remarked at breakfast one morning.

"Of course! Why don't you go today? I shall be busy all morning. The consul and his wife are calling to take me to an exhibition of rugs at the Hotel el Kadr."

Sir Hugh's face cleared completely.

"Splendid! You'll be careful though, won't you, darling? That fellow, Prince Dena, may be hanging about on the chance of seeing you. I've given strict orders that he is not to be admitted on any pretext whatever. If those two are with you today——"

"Exactly," laughed Evadne. "I hardly think even Prince Dena would tackle so formidable a team! Mrs. Lamont would die rather than acknowledge the strain of Arab blood in her, and snubs all natives impartially. And he—well, he sees people and things as she wants him to see them."

"Poor fellow, I can sympathize with him. I know exactly what he feels like!" Sir Hugh looked as dismal as his jolly face would allow. "We must get together, he and I, and talk over this wife business. Can't call my soul my own now."

"Poor old thing!"

She had accompanied him to the entrance hall as they talked, and they stood looking down at the sunlit streets. In the shadow of the deep Moorish arch she suddenly clasped him with the quick

warmth that made her so adorable to him.

"You are so dear and silly, Hugh. I simply couldn't live without you now—the sillier you get, the more I like you."

"That's lucky, as I'm heading in the same direction about you. Now, listen to the parting injunction of a fond but jealous spouse. If you see the Prince, cut him dead. By the way, you've still got the bandage over that mark. The doctor said you might remove it today, didn't he?"

"I think I ought to give it until tonight. It was a rather painful process having it pricked out. It may heal better if I wait a few hours longer."

In the deep shadow her sudden flush was not noticeable. She had already uncovered her hand, and seen the mark as clear and strong as ever, but meant to consult Hadur before showing it to her husband. The latter had been hanging about so miserably restless for the last week, that she wished him to go off without anxiety today.

"Poor child!" He patted the injured hand tenderly. "Well, if I'm going, I'll ride out now before the sun gets any higher. You may expect Hadur and me back tonight, without fail. He'll be surprised to see me turn up."

A last kiss, and he set off down the street to the stables, his white-clad figure very square and uncompromising amidst the flowing burnouses and rainbow hues of the native population.

HADUR was not only surprized, but passionately angry with Sir Hugh, filled with an almost murderous fury as he watched him approach the camp.

"Blind worm! Is he made of wood, or stone, that he can leave her to the mercy of that devil? Oh, by Allah, I could bind him on a wild horse and flog him into the

desert for this treachery to her! He has left her, lost her for ever, the blind dull-witted fool!"

Then in a moment his rare anger passed. He saw Sir Hugh, not as the traitor, but as the betrayed, and immense pity and sorrow filled him.

"*El mektoub, mektoub!*" he quoted beneath his breath. "If he must lose her, then she is already lost. Of what use to strive against one's fate? Is it not hung about our neck from the hour of our birth? We do but tread a path already ordained for our feet."

Sir Hugh looked slightly abashed as he rode up to Hadur, and busied himself with his mount for a minute, with averted eyes.

"Evadne's splendid," he presently remarked, rather jerkily. "Going off with the Lamont griffin and her husband to-day. I've given strict orders not to have the Prince admitted to the house. You and I will be back at sundown."

"It is well, *Arfi!*" Hadur led the way to the tomb without more words, and Sir Hugh followed meekly, knowing that he was in disgrace. But the feeling of guilt was swallowed up in excitement very soon, and for the remaining hours of the day he was too much absorbed to remember that such a man as Prince Dena existed at all.

THE domes and minarets of Bagdad glowed redly in the setting sun as Sir Hugh, with his secretary, dismounted at the stables, and walked toward his spacious white house in the avenue of the Califs. A servant usually sat within the entrance, to question all who climbed the broad steps, and to receive messages if his master and mistress were not at home. This evening, the great arched doorway was deserted. The heavily studded door was closed.

Sir Hugh was about to give a loud rat-tat-tat with the stock of his riding-whip, when Hadur put a hand on his arm.

"Something has gone wrong. Let us enter quietly, and make our own discoveries. There are other entrances."

There were several of them, and the two men found the glass door leading into the palm garden was unlatched. They walked in quietly through a conservatory of heavily scented plants, and thence into Sir Hugh's private study. A strange pall of silence seemed to fill the house almost visibly.

In the wide tiled hall they saw a figure sprawled against the marble wall. It was Ali, the doorkeeper. He was sleeping, and so soundly that nothing would rouse him. Hadur examined him swiftly, lifting an eyelid, feeling his pulse.

"Not drugged! He is hypnotized!" he pronounced.

"Prince Dena!"

Sir Hugh's face was suddenly haggard with anxiety. Hadur's did not change from the settled melancholy it had worn all day. With one accord they turned, letting the servant slip back against the wall. They mounted the great curved central stairway, and reached the western wing, through a labyrinthine maze of corridors and passages.

They paused in the small anteroom which led to a lovely domed chamber, where silken rugs made glowing pools of color on the marble floors, and cushions and divans and rich hangings formed a background worthy of the great Haroun ar Rashid himself.

The anteroom was shut off only by curtains of damask silk, and between them the two men saw something that made them stiffen and freeze like game dogs, still and motionless as statues.

On a divan opposite, across a wide

space of floor, Evadne lay relaxed against a pile of gorgeous cushions. Her head shone like a golden torch in the last rays of the setting sun, her delicately cut features touched to an almost unearthly beauty.

Beside her sat Prince Dena ibn Zodh, his face in profile, like a classic bronze against the window, through which a crimson afterglow blazed. He leaned toward his companion, and the low murmur of a strange rhythmic chant reached the two behind the curtain.

Like a flower turning to the sun, the girl's face turned toward the Prince, her gray eyes wide and shining, her lips parted in delight. She swayed, smiling, closer, closer to the dark intent singer. His two hands went out to her, held the golden head cupped between them as he crooned, with a wild soft wail at the close of each verse:

O ye Red Mist! O ye swift Flame.
Melek Taos! By that bright name,
I serve thee with beauty.
Ahyahaiee! Ahyahaiee!
Dancing red Fire! Dancing white Fire!
Leap nearer! Leap higher!
Baptize this, thy bond-slave.
Ahyahaiee! Ahyahaiee!

Sir Hugh made an agonizing effort to move, to speak, to rush in and snatch Evadne to him. He could not stir a muscle. At his side, Hadur might have been carved from wood; not a tremble or a breath shook him, as he, also, stood rooted to the floor.

Prince Dena bent down to the lovely face between his two hands, and his chant sank to a low mutter breathed against her parted lips:

To thy altar, Melek Taos! To thy altar, O King!
At the rising of the new moon, Melek Taos, I
bring
These white limbs, this gold head in thy bright
arms to lie.
Vau Jotchavah!
Vau Opharim!
Vau Ruach Addonai!

Evadne's lips touched those of the

Prince, clung there, while Sir Hugh was forced to watch with bursting heart. His will, his spirit, his whole being rose up in an agony of effort. Like a great force of water breaking down a dam, with a flashing of stars in his head, and a dreadful jolt of leaping pulses, he came to life.

He gave a queer moan of fury, and leaped forward, dragging down the curtain to his feet. His hands were at Prince Dena's throat, his muscles tensed, his whole intent to batter the life out of that smiling dark face. To his bewilderment he grasped only empty air. Prince Dena stood at the window, looking out calmly; Evadne lay back among the gorgeously hued cushions, her eyes wide and vacant as a sleep-walker's.

"It is useless." Hadur's hand restrained him, his whisper was in his ear: "He is protected. You will injure yourself, but him you can not touch!"

Sir Hugh brushed off the warning hand like an insect.

"Let me alone! Let me alone! This is my job!"

Once more he hurled himself at Prince Dena, who stood with his back now to the window, his black eyes gleaming with fire. Sir Hugh felt a tingling shock that left him numb from head to foot, and he leaned heavily against the window-casing to steady his trembling limbs.

Again he flung himself upon that sleek, smiling enemy. There was a cry, a crash of broken glass, and Sir Hugh hung perilously from the window-frame, caught by a jagged edge of glass, and Hadur's strong hand about his ankle. It was an ignominious struggle to get back to safety. He stood within the room finally, panting, torn, bleeding, and with a fury that made his ears sing, and a mist clouded his eyes.

Prince Dena bowed with ironic gravity.

"I have the honor to bid you farewell, Sir Hugh Willett."

He turned to Evadne.

"To our next meeting, white flower of Paradise!"

He took her hand and carried it to his lips, and in a moment had crossed the threshold of the room and vanished more swiftly than a passing breeze.

"**E**VADNE!" cried Sir Hugh, desperately, as she rose with a sudden energy to look down from the window to the street below.

But the girl appeared completely insensitive to his cry, and to the pain and anger in his face. She stood with face pressed eagerly to an unbroken pane, and, returning finally to her seat, she sank down and gazed vacantly before her.

"Evadne!" Her husband sat down beside her, his voice rough with amazed anger. "What are you thinking of? Are you mad to let this beast kiss you, turn you into a thing of wax? Evadne, look at me! Listen, listen, Evadne!"

But the face he turned toward him, with shaking hand beneath her chin, was calm and still, the eyes brilliant, but their expression fixed and far away—the look of a traveller who gazes with deep longing on some distant land of desire, blind and deaf to all other objects in the way.

Hadur stood back in the shadow against the wall, watching Evadne closely. He looked years older than before he entered the room, a dreadful grayness about his mouth. His wise deep-set eyes were pools of brooding horror.

"Sir Hugh!" He came forward at last, and stood looking down at the young man as a father might look at a stricken child. "We came too late to save her, alas! The evil is past remedy. She will not hear your voice again. She will not see your face again. In her ears the voice of the High Priest drowns every other sound in the universe, and in her vision

she sees only the bright evil spirit that has bound her to him. It has been decreed that this fate should come upon us all. It is the will of Allah!"

"Nonsense, Hadur!" The Arab fatalism had the effect, at least, of rousing the other to battle. "Why should Allah decree a thing of such awful horror? It is the result of my own carelessness. I left her—I left her! Evadne!"

His voice was softly pleading now; he took her hand between his own, stroking it, talking softly to her as if she were a wayward child. Then he and Hadur noticed the mark on her hand simultaneously, and both their faces paled.

"God!" whispered Sir Hugh.

The mark shone red as fire, brilliant, opalescent, baneful, a dark star in the dusk of that gorgeous room. And as the mark burned deeper and brighter, so did Evadne's beauty catch fire, and glow with a new unearthly radiance.

Again and again Sir Hugh tried to rouse her, only to find her in the mist of dreams where she walked alone. It was useless. The gulf between them yawned as wide as death itself.

4. Flight

"**I**'VE ordered the car round for seven-thirty this evening. Lady Willett's maid can follow when she has finished packing the trunks. We'll take the light luggage with us. It's rather awkward about leaving the excavation work, but if you return here after seeing us off at Port Said, it will make very little difference. You'll have all those letters and contracts ready for me to sign before I go, Hadur!"

"Since your mind is made up, I will have all in readiness," replied the secretary gravely. "Won't you reconsider this decision, Sir Hugh? You are making a grave mistake, and playing into the

enemy's hands by this hasty move. To travel in haste, by night, and without preparation or defense against attack, is to give the *Sitt Evadne* into his hands."

"What defense have we, if half you suspect is true? Not that I can credit your beliefs in his magic! All I know is that she has been hypnotized by this infernal scoundrel, and that I'm going to take her where she'll be safe from the sight and sound of him."

"My dear!" Hadur reverted to his native Arabic and mode of address, when profoundly moved. "Anger and sorrow blind thee to the truth. There are means of protection if thou wert willing to submit. The width of the wide earth between the *Sitt Evadne* and this Magus will avail nothing. She bears the mark of the Angel Peacock on her hand, the visible sign of her inner subjugation. Until that mark fades, she belongs to the High Priest who set it upon her."

"Good Heavens, man, what more can I do to have the mark removed? If the electric needle can't touch it, what can?"

"One thing alone!" Hadur answered solemnly. "The High Priest must die. Until he does, it is useless to take refuge in flight, and it will but bring a heavier weight of evil upon us all."

The other's face clouded.

"I wish I could stay and settle him myself." He patted a pocket significantly. "But when you return, I give you *carte blanche* to use my name, and draw on me for any money you need to get rid of him. If you could get the authorities on his track, let them discover this beastly sacrifice business you say he practises, it ought to be easy to get him hanged as a common murderer."

"No, no!" Hadur's eyes held despair. "Have I not said he was protected? No human weapon, no human force can harm a Magus of his standing. He has

mastered the deepest secrets of Zoroaster, and it would be child's play for him to avoid the clumsy traps that the law would set for him."

"Well, what remains?"

"Fire! The Universal Agent! The Prince trod the bitter path of knowledge, passing from stage to stage until control of his senses was absolute. He has heard the Very Voice of Fire! Like the false Magi of old, he no longer practises the tests and ordeals of discipline. He is using the occult forces of nature for his own ends, not for the purpose of giving light and wisdom to the world. Only utter negation of self is his safeguard; therefore he is bound to——"

"Yes, yes! You explained that the other night. Meantime, the Prince holds all the winning cards."

"It is true. He is master as long as he controls the Universal Agent. But you have a saying, 'The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceeding small.' And so it is in this matter. The Law is always the same, call it God, or Nature, or Magic—all are the same!"

"Everything you say persuades me that to protect my wife, I must act, and act at once. I can't wait for the Prince to be caught in his own toils."

"And I repeat that you have not the strength or knowledge to protect her. Prince Dena must be tricked into exposing himself to the full force of the untamable element he uses so dangerously. Fire protects him. Fire must destroy him."

"Hadur!" Sir Hugh got up, and putting his hand on the other's shoulders, looked him squarely in the face. "I trust you beyond any man I know. You have been friend and adviser to me through bad times and good, for more years than I can remember. Now, for the first time, I can not rely on your judgment. I did

not realize clearly before that I am a Westerner, and that you are of the East. I can not follow your arguments. I must take my own way of dealing with a problem so peculiarly my own. My mind is made up. I am taking Evadne away, out of the country tonight."

With a sinking heart the secretary watched the other go off to his study.

"Allah hath permitted his eyes to be blinded, that he may not see the truth," he told himself wearily. "All haste is of the devil, and of this sudden ill-considered journey much evil will come."

THE moon had a red, angry look as it climbed up that night, to peer, over the shoulder of the Mosque el Harib, at the big touring-car standing before Sir Hugh Willett's doorway. The air was heavy, the stars dim, and a breathless heat hung like a pall over the city.

Evadne stood for a moment on the topmost step, looking up at the red disk of the moon, her lifted face so tranquil and exquisite, that a passing beggar drew back with a startled "*Ya salam!* Of a truth, the Unbeliever hath surely drunk of the seven streams of Isfadan! By Allah, it is a beauty not of this earth!"

"Come, darling," Sir Hugh gently urged her. "I think a storm is coming up."

She did not appear to know he was speaking, but continued to watch the angry sky. A low, long mutter of thunder rolled, and she smiled faintly:

"In the voice of the thunder I will speak to you, in the flash of the lightning you shall see my wrath against those who would hide you from me."

She spoke as if quoting remembered words, and Sir Hugh exchanged uneasy glances with Hadur.

Not until the three had left Bagdad a mile or so behind them, and were speed-

ing up the long valley road, did Sir Hugh begin to feel easy in his mind. Hadur, in the back of the car with the luggage, sat anxiously watching the threatening sky.

As the road narrowed to a mere rough track between the towering hills, a sudden fury of wind tore shrieking down the defile to meet them. A curtain of utter darkness fell. The road was unfamiliar, a short cut to their destination, which friends in Bagdad had recommended. It forked to right and left at more than one point, and in spite of instructions which he endeavored to follow precisely, Sir Hugh became convinced that somewhere in the darkness he had taken the wrong turn.

He determined to drive on in the chance of reaching some village, or at least of finding some protected place where they might shelter until the approaching storm had spent itself.

Hadur voiced his own misgivings:

"We seem to have missed the road. I believe we are on the way to the hills where the Yezidees have their stronghold. Can you turn, Sir Hugh? It is madness to court disaster!"

"I can not turn in this narrow place. We must go on now."

"It is madness!" repeated Hadur. "It is the power of the High Priest that draws us on this path."

A clap of thunder, echoing and prolonged, filled the narrow valley with deafening tumult. Hadur's watchfulness increased, and he sat like a dog straining at the leash, his eyes fixed on the skyline above the hills. Sir Hugh gave his whole attention to the wheel, with a darting glance every once in a while at his wife, who sat beside him with a strange look of expectancy and hope in her eyes.

The coppery glow above the dark hills grew stronger, and lightning began to flick in long tongues of fire from peak to

peak. The car bumped and rocked over the uneven track; the occupants one moment dazzled by the dancing incandescent blaze, the next, plunged into a black sulphurous gloom.

The storm seemed to be following the line of the valley, with the car the center and focus of its fury. Hadur looked through the rear window to see a clear sky behind. Overhead the rattle and roar of thunder threatened to shake the solid hills down upon the travellers.

Sir Hugh's face was white and set, as he clung to the wheel, steering more or less by instinct in the darkness and infernal uproar. The road began to climb steeply, the hills drawing in until their jagged peaks almost touched overhead. At a heart-breaking double twist in the road, the car plunged into a shallow fissure that stretched across the way. The engine coughed, gurgled sullenly, and went dead.

The two men got out, opened the hood, and poked about anxiously to discover the damage, Hadur holding an electric torch. Nothing seemed wrong. Puzzled, Sir Hugh turned to enter the car again and examine the switchboard more carefully.

The car was empty. Evadne had vanished.

"Evadne! Evadne! Evadne!"

Sir Hugh's voice rang through the hollow-sounding place with a startled terror that the rocky walls threw back in a hundred echoes. Hadur sent the ray of his powerful torch up and down the path, but only the desolate track itself was visible. Sir Hugh ran forward, stumbling to his knees in haste, calling, running, falling, and blindly running on again.

Then a mighty burst of thunder, accompanied by a violent shaking of the earth, flung both men to the ground, and a second later the sky was split by a mon-

strous sheet of white fire that threatened to wipe the very earth from its appointed place and scatter its ashes amidst the stardust in the void.

FOR long the two lay stunned and blind and deaf, the earth rocking under them. At last Hadur crawled on hands and knees to the other's side.

"Look!"

He pointed an unsteady hand to the craggy summit almost directly overhead. A great arc of light burned steadily, a rainbow of gleaming fire, and beneath it the black massive walls of a building stood humped against the sky. Near by, a taller building loomed, whose metal domes and towers reflected the red light of the fiery arc above. A single straight gleaming tower shot up into the sky, its slender shaft quivering from base to head, with constantly moving light waves, like dancing water beneath a brilliant moon.

"The Palace of the Yezidees, and the Temple of Melck Taos! And there—there is the *Sitt* Evadne!"

Still on their hands and knees, the two turned their faces toward that fiery rainbow, and on the very summit of the crags a man and woman stood plainly visible in the brilliant light.

It was Prince Dena, and with him Evadne in her white-furred wrap. Still partly stunned, Sir Hugh got to his feet, wavering and unsteady, and tried to shout. His voice died in his throat and his numbed arm fell heavily to his side as he strove to signal to that small white-clad figure, poised like a bird on the dark heights above the valley.

With a roar, a cataract of rain fell like a black curtain, beating the two men to their knees again, blotting out the fiery arc, and the castle and temple, swallowing up the slender figure and the tall High Priest by her side.

In a very few minutes the path turned to an icy foaming torrent beneath the feet of the dazed watchers. It was impossible to see an inch before them, impossible to do anything save cling to some spur of rock and fight to keep their footing in that swirling rush of water.

5. *The Trap Opens—and Shuts*

DAWN found them flattened up against the overhanging precipice, soaked, chilled to the bone, and aching in every muscle. Underfoot the water was abating, though running swiftly as a river in spate down the precipitous way.

The car stood axle-deep in the yellowish flood, the fissure holding it firmly in position. Thankfully the two men splashed to its shelter, and were soon dry-clad and enjoying hot coffee and cognac from their travelling-flasks, as well as the contents of a well-stocked food basket.

The sun rose over the edge of the valley walls as they ate, and in a very short time its rays beat down in full strength into the winding defile, illuminating every crack and cranny in it.

"There it is!" exclaimed Sir Hugh, as they once more stepped out into the now rapidly diminishing water, and were examining the cliff face to find the track by which Evadne and the Prince had climbed on the previous night. "There, behind that outstanding boulder!"

They squeezed in behind a great mass of stone and found a firm, clearly defined track, which wound in wide-flung loops across the face of the rock. Barely visible from the road level, once discovered it was an obvious and easy ascent.

Halting at the top, they surveyed the desolate wind-swept heights, and the massive walls of the Yezidee stronghold. In the brilliant sun the light was reflected from every dome and roof, but chiefly focussed on the tall slender shaft of the

Shining Tower, which rose like a pillar of fire from amidst the temple domes. Its light was not steady, but flashed and winked like that of a lighthouse signal, with a radiance that made it impossible to watch it continuously.

"It's a sort of super-heliograph," asserted Sir Hugh. "They are signaling to their brother Yezidees, no doubt. Nothing of a miraculous nature about it. The material they've used in the Tower is exceptional, I admit; I never saw anything attract the sun's rays so powerfully. On the other hand, the sun itself is a miracle out here."

Hadur made no attempt to rob his companion of the comfort of this logical explanation of the wonder before them. He knew that the light-rays from that infernal Tower drew their power from every shining star and planet in the universe, and that they sent out a force that touched people and events as far removed as the poles. The Universal Agent was concentrated and focussed here, gathered up by means of the Tower into a vast storehouse, in the identical manner in which the true disciples of Zoroaster had learned to gather and store it thousands of years ago.

For good or evil, a blind terrific force was harnessed here to earth, and the thought of it in the hands of Prince Dena made Hadur shudder to the soul.

"Those fellows by the gate are watching us. We'd better try to gain admittance there."

Sir Hugh walked resolutely forward as he spoke, and for the hundredth time his secretary admired the courage and resolution which were such marked characteristics of this unimaginative man.

"We seek an audience with the Prince ibn Zodh," Sir Hugh addressed one of the wooden-faced guards. The latter looked rather like two figures from a

child's Noah's Ark, as they stood in their long straight black tunics and tightly bound red turbans. Both guards shook their heads solemnly and gazed past the two visitors to the parched heights beyond.

"We would speak with the High Priest. In the name of Melek Taos, we crave admittance." Hadur's tone was commanding.

The faces of the two guards instantly altered to alert wariness.

"The password," they said in unison.

"Phlagus, Schiekron, and Aclahayr, genii of the fourth Hour," replied Hadur.

The two guards saluted humbly, and stood aside.

"Enter, Masters of the Hour! The way lies open."

Silencing Sir Hugh with a warning look, Hadur led the way into a great courtyard, murmuring as they left the guards behind:

"Leave it to me now. I have learned enough to get us inside the palace. After that——"

THE courtyard was a rectangular enclosure, its towering walls shutting out every gleam of sun. A single low squat doorway broke the dark polished surfaces that closed them in, over which a figure stood out in bas-relief—the figure of a bird, from whose head bright darting flames shot upward. It was a replica of the winged bird which Evadne bore on her hand, and Sir Hugh recognized it with a shudder of disgust.

Two more guards stood here, and challenged Hadur promptly.

"The Black Sword of Gaffarel, Watcher in the House of Mercury," he replied.

"Pass, Magi, diviners of the Great Mystery."

Sir Hugh followed his secretary with a rising anger. He loathed all this mum-

bery, the darkness, the half-seen kabalistic lettering on the walls, the exchange of meaningless words at every entrance door, the air of mystery that the unusual surroundings provoked. He realized that his mind was succumbing, despite his will, to a sense of fear and foreboding, and his sturdy common sense rebelled at such impositions on it.

Hadur turned to see the impatient anger in his eyes.

"Remember," he warned in a whisper, "the *Sitt* Evadne is helpless here; we are all she has to help her now. Do not let your anger betray you."

From one vaulted chamber to another they passed; at each came the challenge and Hadur's quietly assured answer to it. The winged bird met their eyes on every hand, in some form or another—on the robes of the sphinx-like guards; in flaming iridescent colors on the dull smooth blackness of the walls; in the form of hanging lamps in which dancing flames moved ceaselessly in the gloom; or poised over altars on which long tongues of fire writhed like serpents in the shadow of deep-cut archways.

"It's getting infernally hot," muttered Sir Hugh, as they penetrated still further into the interior of the great palace. "And is it my imagination, or do you hear that strange hissing sound? It's been getting steadily louder and louder."

"We are close to the audience chamber, from what my friend told me. This is the hour for the Ritual Dance, and you'll understand the heat and the sound in a few minutes."

The noise increased to a humming roar as they passed another entrance. Hadur, under pretense of stooping to admire an immense glittering presentment of Melek Taos wrought in crystal and holding a great ball of fire in its beak, spoke rapidly to his companion.

"The Prince will bait us. Be prepared to hear and see anything—anything! But keep silent, watch closely, and do not be betrayed into passion."

At the last doorway no guards stood, but across the threshold hung a moving curtain of fire and cloud. Hadur walked straight forward, and Sir Hugh, wrought up to a pitch when he would have taken pleasure in engaging a grizzly bear to single combat, flung himself across the fire-mist without a pause.

A loud purring hum of fire greeted them, and in the first moment they thought the vaulted room in which they stood was going up in flames. As their eyes grew accustomed to the glare, they saw that the tall branching pillars of fire that swept across the length and breadth of the vast room did not touch the gleaming inlaid floor, but played in the air in a sort of fantastic weaving dance.

As they saw the meaning and purpose of the fire, they drew back in sick incredulous horror.

Between the tall flames, like moths blown by a sirocco, a nude capering crowd ran frantically to and fro, striving with unearthly yells to escape the torture of the licking flames; gaunt, deformed, inhuman objects, scarred and withered to the bone. They were the ceremonial dancers, preserved from death by the magic of the very power which tormented them.

"She is there—the *Sitt* Evadne!"

Hadur, more prepared for the unparalleled horrors of the Prince's stronghold, pointed to a massive platform against the wall to their right.

Sir Hugh turned to see her seated beside the High Priest, her eyes fixed in a blank stare on the capering figures below her. Vainly he looked for some means of reaching her, but the platform was high and smoothly polished to its base, and no steps led to it from the floor.

"Evadne!" he called, standing directly beneath her. "Evadne!"

The love and despair in his voice would have summoned her from the last dim portals of death itself. It summoned her now. She stood up, her eyes grave and intent.

"Who calls me?" Her words came softly perplexed. "Oh—who calls?"

Sir Hugh's very soul stood in his eyes as he looked up into her bewildered face.

"Evadne, darling! It is Hugh! Hugh, your husband! Come back to me, Evadne, come back to me!"

The frozen bewilderment broke up, her eyes met his with a sudden tragic awareness.

"Hugh! Hugh, save me! Something . . . holds me! Hugh . . . my darling!"

Prince Dena rose and put a hand on her arm. Instantly all the quick color faded from her face, and she turned with the old dreaming adoration to the Prince.

"We welcome you to our palace, Sir Hugh Willett!" The High Priest bowed mockingly, Evadne's hand clasped in his own. "Tonight we hold the Feast of Sacrifice. Tonight we celebrate my union with this woman whom Melek Taos has seen fit to bestow on me, his devoted servant. Never has it been my lot to hold such golden loveliness in my arms before."

SIR HUGH strove to speak, to move, to curse that smiling, wonderfully chiselled face that looked down upon him. The roaring increased in his ears, the bright flames seemed to dance toward him. Then, at a sign from their master, they receded suddenly like a tide ebbing, and the taunting voice of his enemy came clear through the mist and confusion.

"Not yet, not yet, my servants! He shall join in our Feast tonight. He shall watch me woo this golden loveliness

from his embrace. He shall witness the sacrifice at the rising of the new moon, and stand helpless, O Melek Taos, when thou dost stoop from thy heaven to the Altar! Stoop to thy victim—the perfect sacrifice which I will give thee at the rising of the moon!”

The tide of fire rolled back, sweeping with it those agonized shrieking figures—back—back, with an ever-diminishing hum and crackle, until the vast hall stood empty. The two on the platform vanished also, leaving Sir Hugh shaking in every limb, leaning on Hadur with eyes staring wildly at the deserted thrones of ebony above him.

“Gone! With him—with him!”

Suddenly he made a dash to the arched doorway by which he had entered, but as he neared the fire-mist, a flame shot out and curled about him like a serpent, scorching and blackening his face and hands.

Staggering back, he looked around the great empty hall and discovered other archways set in every wall between broad pillars, on which the signs of the zodiac gleamed in red and gold. No doors barred these open arches, no guards stood before them, no curtain of fire and cloud hung over them.

Yet Sir Hugh could not pass them.

Blind with grief and rage, reckless as a wounded jungle beast, he assaulted each empty threshold in turn. From each he was hurled back by some violent force that sent him reeling and spinning across the floor, only to rise and dash blindly at another entrance.

Hadur watched him with tears. At last, his brief madness of despair over, and convinced that he was indeed a prisoner, he turned to the faithful Arab and sat down beside him with his head between his hands.

“*Arfi!* All is not yet lost. Do not give

way to utter despair while the *Sitt* Evadne is still safe. Allah is merciful, and may even yet restore her to thee.”

“Evadne safe? With him?”

“Safe until the rising of the moon,” declared Hadur. “That much I have learned from the father whose daughter was a Bride of Melek Taos.”

“Safe?—with that hell-fiend all the long hours of this day?”

“*Arfi,* I swear by Allah, and by the life of this body, that the High Priest will not touch her until tonight. He dares not! There are laws even a false Magus may not break, unless he desires instant annihilation. For many days before the sacrifice the High Priest must prepare himself, and abstain from many things. The lips of the destined Bride are one of these things taboo. Until tonight she is safe.”

The other merely groaned.

“It is the truth,” repeated Hadur. “The High Priest may not drink of his cup of love until the destined hour. It is a ceremony of mystic union in which the Angel Peacock shares. Even Prince Dena dare not insult his god!”

Sir Hugh bowed his head to his hands again, and Hadur’s eyes mirrored his own agony, as he stared bleakly before him.

“*Ya habiby!*” he murmured under his breath. “Ah, my beloved! Cursed be he who hath set this darkness in thy path! May the devils he serves rend his soul from his body, and send it shrieking down to hell. *Wa byat rukbaty,* I will follow him to the deepest pit of Gehenna, if he brings that youth and beauty to the dust. Allah be my witness! Allah hear me! Give strength to thy servant! Hear me, hear me, thou just and compassionate One!”

He sat very still, striving to master the tide of love and agony that overwhelmed

him, striving to find a gleam of hope in the darkness.

6. *The Altar of Melek Taos*

AS SARDANAPALUS, King of Babylon, had feasted with his Magi, and women, and favorites, and all the sycophants of a fabulously wealthy court, so did the Prince Dena ibn Zodh, in his black and scarlet robes of ceremony, sit with Evadne at his side on the night of sacrifice.

Wild beasts, controlled by the magnetic power of the Magi, rolled in luxurious ease on silken rugs; the great tables gleamed with jewelled goblets and golden dishes; a thousand instruments mingled with the clamor of a thousand tongues; waves of intoxicating perfumes were wafted up from vaults beneath the palace; myriads of lamps winked and blazed from roof and walls and pillars. At intervals a dancer would float out on to the great white marble circle of floor, round which the tables were grouped, veiled only in her cloud of hair, and moving like a blown leaf before the wind would draw an outburst of applause that set the great beasts roaring until the domed hall rang.

Vast, sinister, marvellous as the dreams of a hashish-eater, the long orgy at last drew to an end. The revellers lay back amidst their cushions, while Prince Dena rose from his place and led Evadne to the center of the enclosed circle.

He held up a hand, and silence fell over the entire multitude of feasters; not even a beast but seemed suddenly turned to a lifeless statue.

Sir Hugh Willett and Hadur, who had sat watchful and silent during the long revel, eating only enough to give them strength, and drinking no wine, looked up with tightening nerves as the destined Bride stood facing the vast assembly.

A single garment of marvellously-wrought gold tissue outlined her lovely slenderness. Her shining head was bound with a richly jewelled circlet of gold, and over her eyes its clasp glittered bright and evil in the myriads of lamps. So brilliant were the gems that formed this clasp that it had all the effect of a living flame, and Sir Hugh shuddered as he saw the hateful familiar symbol of Melek Taos flash, and flash again above Evadne's dreaming misted eyes.

"The Hour is at hand!" The High Priest's ringing tones pierced even the wine-sodden senses of the revellers. "This is my Hour, my Hour of love, my Hour of fulfilment, the Hour of mystic communion with Melek Taos, when he in me, and I in him, rejoice in the Bride!

"Follow!" he continued, turning his burning gaze around the entire circle. "Follow, that you may worship at the great altar of Melek Taos; that you may see the Angel Peacock descend in living Fire—awful, transcendent, inexplicable! Follow! The Hour is come!"

"Not yet, not yet!" whispered Hadur in anguished appeal, as his companion gathered himself up for attack. "You may destroy her body and soul if you strike too soon. It must be done before the altar."

But, crazed with the torture of long imaginings, Sir Hugh was deaf to Hadur's pleading. He snatched up a long curved knife from a table and rushed across the marble floor with a swift silent ferocity that came within an ace of success. A black panther, however, lolling at ease within that circle, saw the flying figure and sprang like an arrow from a mighty bow. Man and beast together rolled at the feet of the High Priest, gleaming fang and gleaming knife matched in a death struggle.

The High Priest smiled. Evadne stared

with a heart-breaking blankness in her eyes. The revellers stood up, cheering and laughing. The other beasts drew near, their heads flattened, their tails switching slowly. There was a fierce prolonged snarl, a choking cough, and the panther suddenly lay very still, a pool of blood spreading over the white marble floor.

Sir Hugh staggered to his feet, and advanced, with his dripping knife still clasped in one shaking hand, his eyes on his dreaming, spellbound wife. The High Priest smiled again, stretching out one jewelled forefinger toward the dishevelled figure.

Instantly the lamp-flames, from end to end of that vast room, flared up to the very roof; a peal of thunder shook the crystal goblets and golden dishes from the tables; the beasts cowered in abject terror; and Sir Hugh, as if struck by some terrible force, was sent hurtling and crashing across the floor to Hadur's side, where he lay limp as a half-emptied sack of meal.

With loud drunken laughter, the feasters turned to follow Prince Dena, in his black and scarlet robes, with a five-pointed star—the Scal of Solomon—fastened in the silken folds of his turban, and the symbol of Melek Taos in rubies on his breast.

Hadur half carried, half dragged the semi-conscious Sir Hugh after the laughing, intoxicated crowd. Down endless corridors and flights of steps they went, until they reached the great vaulted chambers beneath the palace; and thence a subterranean passage cut from the solid rock led to the immense vaults beneath the temple. From one cave-like chamber to another the High Priest led the silent, lovely Bride.

The cooler air revived Sir Hugh. He

leaned less heavily on Hadur, and breathed more easily.

"Where is she? Where is she?" he asked hoarsely.

"There, walking ahead of us!"

The Prince was leading Evadne up a long flight of steps, the crowd at their heels. Hadur and Sir Hugh, now almost himself again, began to push through the drunken, indifferent mob. They were not far from the leaders of it, when a brilliant light broke up the vaulted darkness, and Hadur whispered:

"The Red Altar of Melek Taos!"

They had arrived at the top of the steps, where a row of huge squat pillars stood outlined against a crimson glare from within. The two passed between the pillars and found themselves in a colossal underground chapel, whose walls and floor and roof gleamed in brilliant fiery scarlet. After the long dark passages, with their few lamps, it was some minutes before they could get a clear impression of their surroundings.

Pillars ran along three sides of the chapel, with torches fastened to them. In the fourth wall an immense shrine was hollowed out, running deeply back, and sunk in a semi-circular basin below the level of the floor. In the center of the shrine stood a figure of some insoluble glittering metal, half man, half bird, its head crowned, its wings outspread and curved before its body; its hands and arms were human, its legs scaled and ending in monstrous claws.

From the hollowed base, on every side of the figure, rose luminous, blue-tipped Fire. With the roar of many waters, the incandescent sheets of flame stretched up to lick the lofty roof. It burned with the hum and fierce song of ageless strength and mystery—unapproachable, irresistible, unconquerable Fire!

THE Prince looked at the Bride he had brought to the sacrifice—the proud, shining head, the marvellous tender beauty of eyes and molded lips, the slender matchless symmetry of limbs and body, but above all the spark in her of that divine fire that did not fail or die before the source of its inspiration. Never before had the High Priest brought a Bride to the Altar of Melek Taos without seeing her beauty dwindle and become as insignificant as that of a mere painted doll.

His breath quickened. He watched her, fascinated, unbelieving, incredulous that any woman could stand in the terrible brilliance of that borrowed Fire from heaven and draw from it an added glory to herself. He stepped back to watch her, to engrave on his memory the image of this perfect Bride, before he broke the lovely mold and offered it here on the great Altar.

The roystering mob was awed by the sublime spectacle before them. They drew back toward the walls, back from that unleashed quivering force, the naked pure element from which all life sprang, and to which all life must finally return. They blinked afraid, ashamed, knowing themselves for beasts, and less than beasts, before that clean and living flame.

Evadne stood silent and enthralled by the edge of the fountain of Fire. By her side Prince Dena waited, enthralled also by the unexpected sublimity of this Hour of Love, the radiant figure of the golden Bride appearing as the very spirit of the Fire itself. A passion of desire rose in him, as swift, as fierce, as all-devouring as the lightnings that he gathered in the hollow of his hand.

For the first time he regretted the exigencies of his office as High Priest, and the necessity of yielding up that fair and

lovely body to the fiery embrace of Melek Taos after his one brief Hour of love.

He made an impatient gesture to his Magi, as a sign that they should perform their usual duties. They made the seven-fold obeisance, and moved about the chapel to extinguish the torches and spread a thick carpet of crimson rose petals before the Altar. The Prince stood with eyes on Evadne, oblivious to the rest.

Sir Hugh and Hadur edged nearer and nearer to the Altar. No one prevented them, or noticed them at all, and they bided their time watchfully. Hadur whispered low and earnestly to his companion, under cover of the deep humming song of the Fire, and the latter listened with a faint gleam of hope in his eyes. He did not understand the full extent of the plan suggested, he did not realize what Hadur's rôle was to be. Nor did Hadur mean him to understand.

To save Evadne was the one thought that dominated them both. Sir Hugh was in no state of mind to worry about details. There seemed a last chance—he would take it!

"*El mektoub, mektoub!*" murmured Hadur to himself, and watched Evadne with eyes that took a long farewell.

PRINCE DENA advanced to the Altar, leading Evadne by the hand, and standing before the fire-encircled image of Melek Taos, he cried:

"O Master, behold the Bride!"

The Fire sank down to the floor at his clarion call, seeming to abase itself at the feet of the great Magus who could command it.

"O mighty One! O Melek Taos! O Ruler of Earth!

Bend from thy throne to accept this sacrifice. In mystic communion do thou live in me, as I in thee!

The Hour is mine! The Hour is thine!

The Joy is mine! The Joy is thine!

Be that which thou art, and thou shalt be!

Cover me with the splendor of Eloim and Ischim!

By the Very Voice of Fire, I hail thee, Bright
Spirit!
Melek Taos! Melek Taos! Melek Taos! El Vay!"

At the last word the Fire sprang fiercer and brighter than before. The hum of the flames became a triumphant song.

The High Priest turned his back to the Altar and faced the people.

"Open the doors, O Magi! And ye, worshippers at the shrine, depart and leave me to my Hour! When that is passed"—the voice of Prince Dena sank to its deepest note, his burning eyes veiled for a moment by their heavy lids—"then ye shall return to witness the sacrifice. In the name of Melek Taos, I bid thee go."

Hadur and Sir Hugh were now very close to the Altar. They stood tensed in every muscle, while the crowd about them streamed toward the open doors.

The High Priest stood with eyes on Evadne, enchanted, utterly oblivious to all else. He took one step toward her. It was his last.

He never knew who seized him in arms of steel, hurling him back to that sea of living flame, over the edge of the sunken Altar, into the heart of the singing incandescent Fire!

A long shivering moan rose from the people, as Hadur, with Prince Dena in his arms, rolled over into the triumphant leaping flames. For a brief moment a blinding glare filled the cavernous chapel to its farthest corner as the Fire curled

and roared over its two victims, turning them to mere blackened shells in a few awful moments. Total darkness followed. Not a flicker, not a vestige of the Altar Fire lit the gloom.

Stumbling forward with a great cry, Sir Hugh found Evadne clinging to him, crying, trembling, broken, helpless as a child. Taking her in his arms, he staggered on blindly. Cries and groans sounded on every hand.

How he found the entrance he never knew, but he reached it at last, and followed the subterranean passages, where not one single lamp gleamed now, until a draft of fresher air guided him to a door opening on the courtyard of the Palace.

The place was desolate and silent. The guards, on this night of feasting, lay in drunken sleep across the threshold of the gates.

Down the cliff path the fugitives stumbled, and found the car still standing in the valley. To his intense relief and surprise, Sir Hugh found it answered to his touch, and they reached Port Said safely a few days later.

They never returned to the East. Evadne's vague memories, and Sir Hugh's vivid ones, as well as their sorrow for Hadur's death, robbed the Orient of all its color and romance for both of them, for ever.



