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STRANGER FROM SMALLNESS

By OTIS ADELBERT KLINE

Smaller than a microbe, the Stranger was—but how he grew!

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CHAPTER ONE

Hagg Nadeem

For some time now, as he passed from stall to stall in the sweet-smelling Suk al Attarin, the Street of the Perfumers in the Arab quarter of Cairo, Ralph Blake, American microbe hunter, had been conscious that he was being followed. The young bacteriologist, a tall, slender, sun-bronzed chap with dark brown hair that was bleached at the temples by exposure to the sun, had received a week's furlough from his gruelling labors. He was trying to find the cause of and cure for a mysterious malady that was decimating the native population of lower Egypt.

Ralph Blake's surprise kidnapping flung him into fierce adventure in the torrid Sahara. Then a strange creature from Mercury stepped in—and even Ralph's death couldn't prevent him from unravelling the network of intrigue!

He had hurried through tiffin after his late arrival at Shepherd's hotel, anxious to make the most of the brief time allotted him for diversion in the Moslem metropolis, and had decided to tour the bazaars. The afternoon and evening had passed with many of the bazaars still unexplored, and now, it was near closing time.

Observing the two who had been following him, from the corners of his eyes, he saw that one was short and slight, with a patch over one eye beneath his red *tarboosh*. The other was as tall as Blake himself, but fully twice as wide, and walked with a rolling gait. His rotund countenance might have been jovial, save for the ferocious aspect imparted by three livid scars, two on the left, and one on the right side of his face.

These two, it appeared, were no strangers to hand-to-hand fights, and their cloaks, no doubt, concealed curved, razor-edged *jambiyehs*.

What could be their motive in following him? Robbery? Assassination? That might be it. He had a particularly bitter enemy—Hans Friedl of Vienna—not only jealous of his fame, but filled with undying hatred because Blake had once exposed a ridiculous error he had made.

Twice before, Blake's life had been attempted by obviously paid assassins, once in China and once in New Guinea, and both times he had suspected Friedl. But he had been unable to prove anything because he had been compelled to kill his attackers in order to save his own life.

He began to wish that he had brought his favorite weapon—a Colt forty-five. But, as it still reposed in the bottom drawer of his wardrobe trunk, he could only rely on nature's weapons.

He could, of course, call a policeman. But he had not been attacked, and could not even prove that he was being followed. Besides, every native policeman now seemed suddenly and mysteriously to have disappeared. There were only a few straggling shopkeepers and their employees about.

Keeping close to the nearest of these, Blake, with an effort to appear nonchalant, followed them out of the Suk al Attarin, and turned right on the Sukten Nahhasi. He kept a wary eye on the two villainous looking cutthroats who were following him. It was during one of his quick glances backward that the group he had taken to be harmless shopkeepers suddenly jumped on him. A cloak was thrown over his head, and he was borne to the ground by the sheer weight of numbers.

Blake instantly lashed out from the ground with fists and feet, flinging them in all directions, then tore the stifling folds of the cloak from his head and leaped erect. They were on him again in an instant, like a pack of wolves around a stag, and he saw that the monocular and the scar-faced ruffian who had been following him, had joined them—were apparently the ringleaders. He clipped the former on the jaw, sending him reeling against a wall, then punched the latter in the belly, doubling him up in agony.

Yet the odds would have been far too heavy had it not been for the sudden appearance of the newcomer. He was slender, of medium height, and wore a closely-cropped, jet black beard. Save for his green turban, his clothing was European. He sprang into the fray, laying about him on the heads and shoulders of the rabble with a thick Malacca cane, and shouting in Arabic: "Dogs and sons of dogs! Scum of the *suks*! I'll teach you to attack a friendly stranger!"

At this, Blake's assailants quickly took to their heels, bearing with them the still unconscious monocular, and helping his groaning, scar-faced companion.

The newcomer helped Blake to brush his clothing and put it in order.

"*Yukliff*—" began Blake gratefully, when the other interrupted.

"Don't thank me. It was the least I could do after this unwarranted attack by my countrymen. I am devastated. I am ashamed that such a thing could occur on the public streets. And not one of my police officers in sight."

"Your police officers?" wondered Blake.

"Permit me to introduce myself, *effendi*. I am Hagg Nadeem."

Hagg Nadeem! The name was legendary. Blake had often heard tales of the mysterious head of Cairo's secret police, reputed not only to be an *ulema*, a Moslem holy man learned in *ed din*, the faith of Al Islam, and a *hagg* who had made the holy pilgrimage, but an Oxford graduate, well versed in the arts and sciences of the occident, and a descendent of an ancient line of Egyptian magicians who had communicated their esoteric knowledge from father to son since before the days of Mena, the first pharaoh.

He had regarded many of the tales of this man's exploits as pure fabrication—utterly preposterous—and the man himself as a myth. Now he stood before him in the flesh, suave and smiling.

Blake returned his infectious smile.

"I've heard of you, Hagg Nadeem," he said. "I'm Ralph Blake, bug hunter."

"And I've heard of your brilliant work as a microbiologist, doctor," replied the *hagg*. "Will you join me in a spot of refreshment? There is a cafe nearby."

"I'll be delighted," Blake replied.

They rounded the corner of the next side street, and the Egyptian led the way into a crowded, smoke-filled cafe, where a Moghrebi dancing girl swayed and wiggled her well-rounded curves to the wailing of hautboys, and strumming oudhs, the rattle of tambors, and the throbbing of small drums.

The patrons of the place, Blake noticed, were mostly natives, many of them smoking bubbling *shishas* and sipping small cups of black, syrupy coffee.

"A table for two, Ali," Hagg Nadeem told the obsequious head waiter. "And send Husayn."

Ali seated them on a cushioned divan behind a small circular table, and hurried to summon the proprietor, who lost no time in coming.

"My poor place is honored, *ya hagg*," he said. "What is your pleasure?"

"Coffee for me. For my friend, perhaps, something stronger?"

He looked inquiringly at Blake.

"A double arak, neat," Blake replied.

Hagg Nadeem proffered a curiously carved ivory cigarette case, yellow with age and obviously a valuable antique.

Blake took a cigarette. Hagg Nadeem followed his example, and a watchful waiter quickly held a light to each.

A moment later, the proprietor himself came up followed by two more waiters, one bringing the coffee, the other the arak.

Blake poured four fingers of the powerful anise-flavored date brandy, and tossed it off neat. A pleasant glow went through him as he splashed more of the clear, colorless liquor into the tall glass.

"I needed that one," he told the *hagg*. "Now I'm ready to dawdle over the next in the approved fashion."

"I quite understand," smiled Hagg Nadeem. "A brave man faces danger without flinching, but once it is past there is a reaction."

While the *hagg* talked, Blake suddenly felt a peculiar sensation come over him. At first he felt as if he were shrinking to infinite smallness, while the smiling, bearded face beside him assumed gigantic proportions. The next instant, it seemed that it was he who was swelling to incredible size, that the *hagg* was scarcely larger than a mosquito, and had receded very far away.

Blake was not a toxicologist, but he knew the symptoms. *Bangh*, the subtle oriental drug that changes and distorts the senses! He had been doped either by the cigarette or the drink.

He clutched the table, tried to rise. But the cloth came away in his hands, spilling coffee and liquor. He sank back, inert, as consciousness left him.

CHAPTER TWO

Mysterious Host

Blake awoke with a splitting headache, and a thirst which he knew could not have been engendered by four fingers of arak. He opened his eyes and squinted around him. He was lying on a low divan, clad in embroidered silk pajamas that must have cost a small fortune. Silken coverlets and pillows spoke also of opulence. Antique rugs, every one a collector's piece, Bokharas, Kashgars, Kashans, Kermanshahs, Feraghans, Daghestans, and many others, completely covered the walls as well as the floor.

The room was lighted by an antique oil lamp suspended from the ceiling by four golden chains, the oil containing a perfume which scented the room with heavy fragrance. The ceiling was decorated with ornate arabesques.

Blake sat up. His head swam dizzily and a feeling of nausea attacked him. But this gradually subsided, and he got to his feet. No door or window was visible, so he began systematically drawing back one rug after another. The first two revealed only bare expanses of wall. The third showed the outlet of what was obviously an air-conditioning system, which accounted for the comfortable temperature of the room as compared to the terrific heat of the outdoors.

Behind the fourth rug was a heavy mahogany door. He tried the handle and found it locked. Just as he was about to pound on the door to attract attention, the lock clicked and the door swung outward.

A giant negro, naked save for turban and loin cloth, held the door open. A light skinned Abyssinian girl held a tray on which was a steaming copper pot, a small cup, and a package of cigarettes.

"Your coffee, *sidi*," she said.

Placing the tray on a small teakwood taborette inlaid with mother of pearl, she filled the cup with steaming, spiced coffee, and withdrew.

Blake heard the door softly closed and locked.

After a second cup of coffee and half a cigarette, the American began to feel a bit better. He was about to go and pound on the door once more, when he heard it open. This time a young Arab entered.

"*Salaam aleykum*," he said with a polite bow. "Your bath is ready, *sidi*."

Blake followed the bath boy along a dimly lighted hallway, with stucco walls, mosaic tiled floors, and flickering alabaster oil lamps which hung from the ceiling at intervals of about ten feet.

The bath room again reflected the wealth and magnificence of his host, with its walls of black marble and sunken tub of pale green tile. All metal fixtures were gold plated.

After a bath, shave and massage, Blake's *bangh* hangover had practically disappeared, and he was ravenously hungry. The bath boy then opened the door of a connecting dressing room.

Here another young Arab had laid out his clothes, neatly pressed. Obviously, his abductors must have obtained his baggage at Shepherd's, perhaps by faking his signature on a note and paying his hotel bill. He found his wallet and small change intact, and the boy who had brought his clothing produced his wrist watch.

Another door, opening into the hallway, swung wide, and the Abyssinian girl announced: "Breakfast awaits in the *salamluk*, *sidi*."

She ushered him along the hallway once more, then down a winding stairway into a large room, circled at the top by a screened balcony, and fully two stories in height. It was furnished in oriental splendor.

A man was seated at the far end on a high cushioned divan behind a large taborette. As the American drew near, he stood

up to greet him. He was big and powerful of frame. His features, however, save for the eyes, were veiled by a corner of his *kufiyeh*.

"*Salaam aleykum, ya shaykh*," said the American.

"*Wa aleykum salaam, Hakim Blake*," the man replied. "*Fadil*," motioning him to a seat on the divan. His voice was pleasant and well modulated.

His guest seated, the big man resumed his own place on the divan and clapped his hands. A serving man entered, bearing a tray on which was a plate of *khubz*, bread baked in flat round loaves and cut in narrow strips, and a small dish of crystalline rock salt.

The big man tore two small bites from one of the strips, and dipped them in the salt. He passed one to Blake with a pious "*Bismillahi!*" and ate the other, himself. Blake accepted and ate the bite of bread, and the serving man withdrew.

Blake was well aware of the "law of the salt". If a Bedouin ate bread and salt with a guest, he not only signified that he was his friend, but that the guest was under his protection. A Bedouin who broke the law of the salt would consider his face blackened, himself disgraced in the eyes of God and man.

Once more the big man clapped his hands, and three more servitors entered with melons, fruits, eggs fried in butter, *khubz*, assorted pastries and coffee.

Not a word was uttered during the meal. When it was completed the host thanked God with a fervent "*Alhamdulillah!*" which was echoed by Blake. After they had laved their hands in cool water poured from the thin neck of an earthen vessel by a serving girl, two tall, ornate *shishas*, topped by glowing charcoal, were brought.

Blake placed the amber mouthpiece between his lips, and inhaled the water-cooled smoke while waiting for his host to speak. The latter did so after exhaling a wisp of blue vapor.

"The sun of my day is darkened," he said in Arabic, "and the moon and stars of my night are muffled in clouds."

Blake readily interpreted this to mean that his host was afflicted by a great sorrow, and that, perhaps, there was something he could do about it.

"Allah grant you the power of peace," he replied, "but after, it may be that, *inshallah*, I can be of some small assistance."

Blake felt that this was his best course. No indignant questions as to why he had been abducted, no blustering about his rights as an American citizen, but a frank and friendly offer to try to help this man who had proffered undying friendship and protection according to the custom of his race.

"May Allah return your kindness a thousand fold," said the *shaykh*. "I deeply regret that I was compelled to use the only means left to bring you here. But, as you are aware, I had no choice left after your three refusals—"

"My three refusals!" interrupted Blake. "I don't quite understand."

"I still have your written answers to my three letters, which were signed 'Shaykh Subhan', though that is not my name, requesting your assistance," said his host.

"But I never received or answered any requests for assistance," said Blake. "I'd like to see those letters."

The black eyes of the *shaykh* regarded him keenly for a moment above the concealing *kufiyeh*.

"There is much in this that puzzles me, *sidi*," he said. "Despite the letters, I believe you. And you shall be shown them in due course. But, at present, we have before us a far more important matter—a matter of life and death."

"Suppose you tell me about it," Blake suggested.

"My daughter has lain like one dead for more than three months. Yet the learned *hakims*, the doctors of your race and mine, say she is not dead. She is my only child, the jewel of my home and the salt of my life. She does not speak or move or even breathe. She takes no food or water, yet does not waste away, nor does her body temperature change. One of our Arab *hakims* said she had been bewitched by a *jinni*, but, as every one knows, there are no *jinn* in these days.

"The *Feringhi hakims* are confounded, and can do nothing, but recommended your services. That is why, when I received those three refusals, I had you brought here through the contriving of my lifelong friend, Hagg Nadeem."

"I'll examine your daughter. But first, where am I? And what about laboratory equipment?"

"You are in my humble house on a certain oasis in the Arabian desert, brought hither in my airplane. I cannot reveal more, as I do not wish you to know this location, or my name. But if you succeed in healing my daughter, I promise to make you wealthy beyond your most extravagant dreams. I had a complete laboratory installed here two months ago."

He clapped his hands, and a servitor appeared in the doorway.

"Send Marjanah," he commanded.

The servitor withdrew silently, and a few moments later, a portly, capable looking Soudanese woman appeared in white uniform.

"This is my daughter's nurse," said the *shaykh*, "who has cared for her since birth. She will conduct you to her."

The old nurse led him up a winding stairway to the balcony that circled the top of the large *salamlik* and was screened from the observation of any one below by *mashrabiye* lattice work.

"*Destooir!*"

She shouted the warning to all females within hearing to veil their faces, as a man other than their master approached. An instant later the door facing them was swung open by a huge black eunuch, armed with a scimitar and *jambiyeh*, and as tall and muscular as the one who had been on guard at Blake's door that morning.

Marjanah waddled past the eunuch into the *harim* and Blake followed. They passed several curtained doorways which exuded the scents of exotic perfumes and from which came the subdued murmur of female voices. At the end of the corridor, a slave girl drew back a curtain, and Blake followed Marjanah into the richly furnished boudoir of the *shaykh's* daughter.

Waddling up to the bed, the old nurse crooned: "Nuralayn, my little white dove, the great *hakim* has come at last to heal you. Awaken, my little pigeon."

Nuralayn. Blake translated the name automatically as he stepped forward. *Nur al ayn*—Light of the Eyes. And, as he saw the slender, youthful figure that lay on the bed, he realized that the name was well deserved. The thin silken coverlet failed to hide the lovely curves of budding young womanhood. Nor did the *yashmak* of lace and tiny strung pearls which the nurse had placed over the girl's face, covering all but the eyes and profusion of wavy, night-black hair which lay on the pillow, conceal her exotic beauty.

"Light of the Eyes! She's a knockout!" thought Blake. Then he recalled that his visit was purely professional, and tried to recover from his surprise sufficiently to act the part.

He was well enough acquainted with Moslem decorum to refrain from lifting the *yashmak*, however, he drew back a corner of the silken coverlet, picked up the limp arm that lay next to him, and felt for the pulse. No heartbeats were discernible.

"Tell your master I'll need a stethoscope," he informed Marjanah.

"Right here, doctor."

He turned at the sound of a new voice behind him, and saw a white clad nurse, her features concealed by a surgeon's mask. She had wheeled in a small table, on which surgical instruments lay in a porcelain tray. She was proffering the stethoscope.

Blake listened for heartbeats and sounds of breathing. Both were inaudible. He raised an eyelid, not unmindful of the

beauty of the long, curling lashes. Then he raised the other. The eyes were turned upward and inward, as if in deep hypnosis.

Catalepsy, he thought. But what can have caused it?

"We'll take a blood specimen," he said.

His capable assistant handed him a tuft of cotton and a bottle of alcohol. When he had sponged the white skin just above the crook of the elbow, she handed him the needle with plunger set. As it slowly seeped into the glass barrel of the instrument, Blake saw that the blood was rich, red, and healthy looking as that of a normal individual.

"Where's the laboratory?" he asked.

"I'll show you immediately, doctor."

Marjanah held back the door curtain as the nurse wheeled out the table, Blake following. They passed the curtained doorways of the *harim* and the big eunuch, then circled the balcony, presently entering a room on the far side. It was a clean, white-tiled laboratory with the latest and best equipment, lighted by a row of large windows that let in the sunlight. Looking out, he saw a rolling expanse of desert sand dunes, with the heat devils quivering above them in the hot sunshine.

Blake set to work at once, making the routine tests and examinations, but could find nothing wrong. The blood seemed perfectly normal and he was about to remove the last slide from his compound microscope when a tiny, an unbelievable figure near the center of the drop of diluted blood he was examining, caught his eye.

It was a living, moving, microscopic replica of the girl from whom he had just taken the blood sample!

CHAPTER THREE

The Stranger

Blake was dumfounded. A tiny human figure smaller than a blood corpuscle, less than one twelve-thousandth of an inch in height! And one which perfectly reproduced the form of the girl from whom it had been taken. What could it mean?

He blinked, and looked again. Perhaps this was a hallucination induced by the *bangh* with which he had been doped.

Now the figure was moving. It was raising its tiny arms toward him. One hand pointed to its mouth. The other rubbed its stomach.

"Good God!" he exclaimed. "It's—she's hungry."

"I beg your pardon, doctor."

His assistant, still masked, was standing at his elbow.

"Eh? Oh, nothing. I mean—our patient is hungry. She must be, after three months without food. Blood shows starvation symptoms—hunger toxins."

He didn't quite know why he had said that. Something inside him, it seemed, was warning him not to tell this masked assistant of his what he had seen. A telepathic message, perhaps! The tiny figure in the water droplet had now laid its finger on its pouting lips.

He turned to his assistant. "Go and attend the patient. Let me know at once if she should show any sign of returning consciousness."

"Yes, doctor."

Alone, Blake turned his attention once more to the tiny figure in the drop of water. It was still signalling for food. But how could he feed this minute being?

He hunted around, found some sterile glucose, and mixing a small quantity with a little distilled water, added it to the droplet on the slide. As he removed the dropper, he thought he saw a tiny creature smaller than a midge, circle upward from the slide and fly toward the sink.

Once more he applied his eye to the microscope. The little figure had disappeared! Had he killed or dissolved it? Or had it sprouted wings and flown away?

He went over the slide very carefully, moving it to bring the field of the microscope around the edges of the drop, and gradually spiraling to the center. But there was no sign of the tiny individual he had seen before. He then made an examination with the polariscope, but could discern no trace of the glucose he had dropped.

As he worked, he was increasingly aware of a slight rustling sound behind him. However, he was so absorbed by what he was doing that he paid no attention, until he suddenly heard a deep bass voice say:

"Thanks for the lift, doctor."

He turned and saw, not a man, but a plant! At least, it resembled a plant. It was a bright green in color, though quite unlike any plant he had ever seen. Its grotesque, fluted, barrel-shaped body was supported by six corkscrew shaped tendrils, each about three feet in length. Another fringe of tendrils grew from around the upper rim, like the tentacles of an octopus. One of these, he observed, was attached to the opening of the water faucet. A second was twined about the handle. All others ended in large, spade-shaped leaves which were swaying gently in the bright sunlight, making the rustling sound which he had heard.

Up from the center spiraled another tendril about an inch in thickness. It was surmounted by a pear-shaped head, with grotesque features that looked remotely human. The head was crowned with fern-like leaves that curled upward and outward.

The creature was growing swiftly, the body swelling like an inflated balloon, while the head expanded in proportion, and the leaves and tendrils lengthened.

Speechless with amazement, Blake watched it grow until the leaf crown touched the ceiling. Then the tendril beneath the water faucet was withdrawn, and the one which gripped the handle turned off the water.

The head, now larger than a bushel basket, spoke.

"You seem startled, doctor. But I observe that you are not afraid."

"Why should I be," Blake replied. "You are only a hallucination like the little figure I saw on the slide. It disappeared, and so will you."

"You are expressing a hope rather than a conviction," grinned the huge head. "You don't like my looks, and so you hope I'll disappear. But tell me, why did you drop that glucose onto the slide?"

"I, er, there was an appeal for food. I didn't know what else to use for a microscopic creature."

"You did wisely," rumbled the giant. "I was that microscopic creature. You responded to my appeal for food, and I will not forget it. In fact, I am going to help you."

"Just who and what are you?" asked Blake. "And how could you change from a protozoan to a giant plant?"

"Simple enough when you know how to control natural laws," was the reply. "As to who and what I am—all in good time. For the present you may consider me a *jinni*. That's what the Arabs have always called my people. No doubt you've read 'The Thousand Nights and a Night'."

"I regard those stories purely as works of the imagination," said Blake. "And, frankly, I consider you a figment of the imagination. You have no real existence, but are the result of suggestion, perhaps by that wily magician, Hagg Nadeem, brought about through hypnosis or drugs. You are a hallucination; your voice is telepathic."

"Even for a scientist, you are unusually narrow and dogmatic," rumbled the deep voice. "If I weren't obligated to grant you three wishes by the ethics of my people, I might refrain from doing so on that score, even though you now blindly stand in deadly danger, arguing with me about whether or not I exist."

"If you are not a hallucination or a hypnotic suggestion, you might tell me who and what you are."

"A complete explanation would be beyond your power to grasp," was the reply. "You don't believe in the *jinn*, and I didn't tell you I was a *jinni*—only that my people are so called by the Arabs, and surrounded with superstitious legends. In other lands they have been variously called elves, fairies, leprechauns, and a host of other names, when they revealed themselves. I am a visitor from another planet—the one you call Mercury."

"That's preposterous," said Blake. "There could be no life on Mercury, with its perpetually broiling day on one side and its unchanging terrifically cold night on the other."

"Not life as you biologists know it here," was the patient explanation. "But life, nevertheless, infinitely more intelligent than anything on this planet. It has had to be, from the beginning, because of the difficulty of survival under such conditions. You, as a microbiologist, are aware that there are microorganisms on the earth that can live and reproduce in boiling water."

"Granted," said Blake. "I've seen them."

"My people, normally, are sub-microscopic. We are smaller than electrons—smaller, even, than photons."

"And I presume you traveled here from Mercury on an electron."

"Your guess is closer than you realize, but not quite accurate. My space ship was towed here by a controlled positron, with the speed of light," came the stranger's deep voice.

"And where is your space ship now?"

"Moored in one of the molecules of this form which I have temporarily assumed. I can always get it when I want it, can go back instantly to sub-microscopic smallness. When you extracted me from the vein of that lovely creature whom I was investigating, I was smaller than a filterable virus. However, I swiftly built up a unicellular body the size of a microbe, physically, a protozoan. I knew you would be interested in a strange protozoan—that, in fact, was what you were looking for and half expecting to find. But I knew, also, that you would be definitely more interested in a body of microscopic size shaped like the girl. So, as a single celled animal-cule, I assumed that shape. Like an amoeba, it was easy for me swiftly to assume almost any shape."

"Why did you want to get my attention and communicate with me? And why were you 'investigating' the girl?"

"I'll answer your last question first, since it forms the background for the other. I am here on a scientific expedition. It has been some time since any of my people visited your planet, and I was delegated to check up on evolutionary progress here. Originally, I fell into the lily pond that surrounds the fountain in the courtyard. I investigated the protozoans and took notes. Then I examined more complex creatures and the plants that grew around and in the water.

"I was investigating a lotus flower when Nuralayn came into the courtyard, sat on the rim of the fountain, and plucked the flower. Before placing it in her hair, she inhaled its fragrance, and me with it. I was, at the moment, smaller even than one of the minute osmophores of floral aroma she drew in through her lovely nostrils.

"After she had returned to her room, I put her in a state of suspended animation, so she wouldn't be moving about and disturbing me during the examination, which took quite a long while. You humans are tremendously complex organisms, as you know. And there was a lot of checking to be done in order to note what evolutionary changes, if any, had taken place since her ancestors were investigated."

"Reasonable enough," said Blake. "But that doesn't explain your subsequent actions. They seem entirely illogical."

"And so they are if you lack a sense of humor. I observe that yours is not over-developed. However, we *jinn*, as the Arabs call us, do have a highly developed sense of humor. We are fond of playing pranks, and frequently of assuming shapes which frighten and mystify men. I had been grubbing along for many weeks and was ready for some relaxation when you happened along.

"I didn't have to have that glucose. But it was tremendously useful to me, and I gave you the chance which many of my people have given yours, to do me a favor, in return for which, if performed, you would be granted three favors or wishes. As a biologist, you should be able to guess what I did after that."

"As a protozoan, you absorbed the glucose, a highly concentrated organic food compound. You expanded the single cell you inhabited, or perhaps, multiplied the cell by fission, making a more complex organism."

"Right the last time."

"Then you sprouted wings, flew to the sink, and there began your present growth."

"By what process?"

"There is none which even begins to explain it, except photosynthesis."

"Photosynthesis it is. I required only carbonic acid gas, air, water and sunlight, in order to build up the various carbon and nitrogen compounds of which this experimental body is composed, and all were here in abundance. It is true that there were a number of elements lacking, which I might have utilized, had they been available. But the carbon and nitrogen compounds are ample for my purpose. I can assume any shape or color I wish, with them alone. And I don't even need to get my water from a tap. There's plenty of it in the air. The tap was easier, it was available, and I was feeling a bit lazy after my strenuous investigations.

"But I perceive that you are worried about Nuralayn. She is unharmed and is now conscious and taking nourishment. I

removed the hypnotic spell after you put me on the slide. However, her recovery has put you in deadly danger. I must warn you that—. Ah! Too late. It's here already."

Blake turned involuntarily at the sound of the opening of the laboratory door. Standing in the hallway was the masked, white-clad form of the nurse. The right hand held a long-barreled Luger, to which a silencer was attached, and it was leveled at his head. There was a coughing sound accompanied by the click of the recoiling breech, and the heavy bullet smacked him between the eyes, passing through his brain and out through the back of his head, blacking out all consciousness.

CHAPTER FOUR

Mortal Enemy

Blake's lapse of consciousness, it seemed, had lasted for but an instant. For he saw the assassin still standing in the doorway, smoking gun in hand, looking down at his body. The latter raised the white skirt, revealing a pair of man's trousers, rolled up above the knees, and thrust the gun into a holster.

Behind him stood a man wearing a red tarboosh—the big, scar-faced man who had shadowed Blake in the bazaar. He said in guttural German:

"Did you get him, Doktor Friedl?"

"Between the eyes, herr captain," was the response of the white clad figure, in the same tongue. "He won't cross my path again. But we must get away quickly. *Raus!*"

Further vision of the two was cut off by the closing of the door. From where they had stood they had not been able to see the sink or the photosynthetic creation of the Stranger.

So it was his mortal enemy, Friedl, who had had him captured and brought here. Evidently, the Viennese bacteriologist had tried his best to determine the cause of the girl's coma, and had failed. As a last resort, he had advised her father to send for Blake. But he had seen to it that the requests had never reached the man he envied and hated, and that forged letters of refusal had come to the *shaykh*. He wanted Blake to come as a prisoner, not as a friend, perform his task, then fall easy prey to his pistol.

The recovery of Nuralayn and Blake's preoccupation in the laboratory had given him the opportunity he sought. As for the other, evidently a Nazi officer, his scars received in the customary student duels, Blake knew his presence in Arabia in disguise meant that some secret plans directed against the Suez Canal or the Irak oil fields, or both, were being carried out.

As these thoughts raced through Blake's mind, he suddenly remembered that he was supposed to be dead. Yet, here he was, standing erect, and looking toward the door which had just closed. It didn't make sense. He turned around and saw the reason. His body still lay on the floor as it had fallen, the head lolled over to one side. There was a round, blue hole in the forehead, and the back of the head was a bloody mess that made him shudder. He was dead! There could be no doubt of it. He tried to pick up a test tube on the table beside him. His hand, though it seemed substantial enough to him, passed through it as if it had not been there at all.

So shocked was he by the swift sequence of events, and the realization that he had passed into another plane of existence—a plane in which, as a practical scientist, he had never believed—he had forgotten the presence of the Stranger. But the deep, bass voice of the latter made him look up.

"I intended to warn you," he said, "but your enemy acted more swiftly than I anticipated. I am still ready, however, to grant you three wishes, whenever you choose to express them."

"What good are three wishes or any number of wishes to me, now?" asked Blake dejectedly. "I'm dead. This is the end."

"It is true that you are dead according to the standards of the materialistic world into which you were born," said the Stranger. "But this is not the end."

"Just what and where am I?" asked Blake.

"You are now inhabiting your astral body, which accompanied your other organic shell. It is just as material as the one on the floor, but in a different space, coëxistant with the one you just left. Ordinarily, in the new space, you would not be able to see your body, this room, or this photosynthetic experiment I have built up—let alone hear its voice. However, I have bridged the gap for you between the space you are now in and the one I am at present inhabiting, by amplifying your undeveloped inherent power which your scientists call ESP, or extra sensory perception—a power of the subjective mind, or ego.

"But that will be enough explaining for now. I perceive your fervent wish to return to the spatial existence you just left. Shall I grant that wish for you, as number one? I can build a new body for you, or repair the old one. What is your pleasure?"

"I'd prefer the one I had."

"Granted. That makes my work a bit less complicated. While I do this repair job, I suggest that you go to the *salamlik*. Something is about to take place there which will be of considerable interest to you."

Blake turned and walking to the door, tried to open it. But the handle was like thin air to his touch.

"Walk through it, man," said the stranger. "Have I been talking to you for nothing?"

Blake went through the door as if it had not been there, traversed the balcony that circled the upper half of the *salamlik*, and descended the stairway.

The big man known to him as the *shaykh* was seated where he had last seen him. But now, his face was not veiled. And Blake instantly recognized the hawk nose and flaming hennad beard of Sidi Abdul Hafiz al Hasani, direct descendent of Mohammed, and the head of his desert tribe. His picture appeared frequently in papers all over the world, and by some, he was regarded as more powerful than the king, himself.

Beside him sat Nuralayn. As there was no one else present, her lovely features were unveiled. The *yashmak* and scarf lay on the taborette before her. As he had seen her before, he had felt attracted to her, and had fought off the feeling. Now, as he observed her, bright-eyed and vivacious, chatting with her father, the feeling returned with overwhelming force, and he realized that there was a bond between them which not even death could sever.

The *shaykh* said: "Can't you tell me which man with Allah's aid, brought about your marvellous recovery?"

"I wish I might, father. I did not see the strange *hakim*, yet, somehow I seemed to sense his presence. I sense it even now. I picture him as tall, slender and handsome, with dark brown hair that has been bleached at the temples by the sun. I dreamed of him as I lay there unconscious; I feel that he is here with us, now."

"But that is impossible," said her father. "He is up in the laboratory."

"According to the learned *hakims*, my illness was impossible, also. I know only that when I awakened Marjanah was with me. Hakim Friedl came in a few moments after, disguised as a nurse. He looked surprised when he saw me awake, and so when he told me that he had cured me I did not believe him. He told Marjanah to bring me some broth, and then went out rather hurriedly, as if he had just thought of some matter he must attend to at once."

"There is much in this affair that confounds the reason," said the *shaykh*. "I am beginning to have doubts of the sincerity of my declared friend, Hakim Friedl. And it seems a strange coincidence that your healing should take place with the advent of the new *hakim*, whereas, Friedl was here for two months, and could do nothing."

At this moment, one of the sharif's giant negro guards appeared in the doorway and cried:

"*Destooir!*" Then he announced: "Hakim Friedl and his servants, Abdullah and Selim."

As Nuralayn hastily adjusted the *yashmak* and scarf, concealing her hair and the lower part of her face, Blake turned and saw Friedl, now undisguised and wearing tropical whites, enter the room. He was followed by the huge, scar-faced man who had shadowed Blake in the *suk*, and his companion, the little, wiry monocular. Blake recalled that Friedl had addressed the big man known as Abdullah as 'captain', and judged that he must be a Nazi officer in disguise. What mischief could these two now be planning, here in the Arabian desert?

CHAPTER FIVE

Unmasked

Friedl, though slight in stature for a man, was quite good looking. His smooth-shaven features were regular in outline, and his manner was suave and polished.

"*Fadil*," invited the *shaykh* politely, as they came up. "Please be seated."

Friedl took the seat on the U-shaped divan on the side nearest Nuralayn. The others sat down on the other side.

"I have come to congratulate you, *sidi*, and to claim my reward," said Friedl.

Abdul Hafiz replied: "Your congratulations I accept, and, *Alhamdulillah*, I thank God for the blessing He has seen fit to bestow upon his servant. But your mention of a reward puzzles me."

"Surely you have not forgotten that you promised me anything I might ask, in case I should heal your daughter," said Friedl.

"I have not forgotten," replied Abdul Hafiz. "But I have no proof that you healed my daughter. It was only after Hakim Blake arrived that she recovered her health."

"Hakim Blake had nothing to do with her recovery," said Friedl. "He was not even in the room when she regained her senses."

"Why not send for Hakim Blake and let him speak for himself, father?" suggested Nuralayn.

"I have already done that," the *shaykh* replied. "I told Mahmood to go and summon him as soon as he should admit Hakim Friedl. Here he comes, now." He raised his voice. "Admit Hakim Blake, Mahmood," he commanded.

The big eunuch came in, and Blake saw that his hands were trembling and his eyes were big with fear.

"There has been a most calamitous happening in your household, master," he said, his voice quivering. "Hakim Blake is dead, shot through the head and lying on the floor of the laboratory. And there is draped over him a strange and most horrible looking plant, the like of which I have never seen before. It looks like a creation of the *jinn*, and it has a big head larger than a watermelon. It roared at me, and I believe it is about to devour the body of Hakim Blake."

Abdul Hafiz looked closely at the big negro, observed the expression of fear in his rolling eyes and the trembling of his huge hands.

"What old wives' tale is this, Mahmood?" he asked fiercely. "No member of my household would slay a man with whom I have eaten salt. And you know as well as I that there are no *jinn* in these days."

"Only Allah is all-seeing and all-knowing," quavered Mahmood, yet added resolutely: "Perhaps the master will look for himself."

At this, Blake saw a look of understanding pass between Friedl and the scar-faced Abdullah. Simultaneously, the three men whipped out Lugers, covering Abdul Hafiz, his daughter, and the eunuch.

"No need to look, *shaykh*," said Friedl. "Blake is dead, and I killed him, as I will you, and all of your household if you don't do as I say. You have refused to pay me the reward so I'll take it by force."

Ignoring the leveled pistol, the *shaykh* looked at Friedl, and Blake saw that he was unafraid.

"I will die with resignation if it is the will of Allah," he said. "But I will die with sadness in my heart because I have entertained a false friend. You have blackened my face and disgraced me with my people by slaying a guest with whom I have eaten salt. Shoot us all, then, and have it over with. But you and your servants will not escape this house alive. At the first sound of a shot, my people will tear you to bits—you and your henchmen."

"You are mistaken, *shaykh*," said Friedl. "All other members of your household are now the prisoners of our men. If you

need proof, look."

A man wearing the uniform of a Nazi corporal, and carrying an automatic rifle, stood in the doorway. At a sign from Friedl, he stepped aside and barked a guttural command, whereupon, a dozen soldiers carrying rifles with bayonets fixed, marched in.

Friedl's companions now threw off their Arab disguises. The big scar-faced man wore the uniform of a captain in the flying service; the small man, who also discarded his eye patch, was a lieutenant.

"Captain Speyer and Lieutenant Hess," announced Friedl.

"I'll take over, now, Herr Doktor," said the captain. "*Shaykh*, we have finished with subtlety. You, and all of your household are our prisoners. We will use your castle and your oasis as an air base and radio station. Underground hangars will be built. The caravan from the coast, which was secretly landed several days ago, has just arrived with men, tools and supplies. Look out the window."

"The Saudi government will not submit," said the *shaykh*. "You and your men will be slain or driven out."

"The puny government of Ibn Saud will not be in existence much longer," sneered the captain. "He is only a puppet of the British, anyway. As soon as this base is ready, five thousand of our planes will come. Parachute troops will quickly capture all of the smaller cities. The larger will, if necessary, be subdued or destroyed by bombs. Egypt will be crushed between Italian Libya and German Arabia. Then we will develop this country as it should be developed. The Suez Canal will no longer be a British ditch."

Blake saw the whole plan instantly. Arabia turned into a German colony. Italy holding Egypt. The British life-line broken—England cut off from India and Oceania, save by the long and hazardous route around the Cape, or the still longer one through the Panama Canal. The British Empire partitioned among the dictator-nations. Then there would be nothing left, save the Americas, and that would mean a fearful struggle to the death for his own countrymen. He must do something about it—must try to save his country from the frightful ordeal of such a war. But how?

"You will go to your *harim* now, *shaykh*, where you will remain a prisoner," said the captain. "So long as you make no resistance or effort to escape, it will not be violated. I claim only the reward promised the Herr Doktor, which you declined to give—your daughter. Nuralayn will go with me to my quarters."

Abdul Hafiz had been listening with patient resignation. But when this affront to the honor of his daughter was mentioned, his face became a thundercloud of wrath, and the large vein on his forehead which marked him as a descendent of the Prophet, stood out like whipcord.

He rose to his full height, and said:

"You filthy *Feringhi* swine! My daughter is not for you!"

With the speed of a striking serpent, surprising in a man of his size, his hand flew to his belt—came up with the keen, silver-mounted *jambiyeh*. Then he sprang straight at the captain, ignoring his leveled Luger.

The captain fired, point blank, just as Blake who, in his excitement had forgotten that he was powerless to aid, leaped at the officer and attempted to wrest the pistol from his grasp. His leap carried him, not into the midst of the fray, but into a cold, whirling black void.

When he could see once more, he found that, instead of standing in the *salamlik*, he was lying on his back looking up at the ceiling of the laboratory.

CHAPTER SIX

Second Wish

Astounded at his sudden transition from the *salamlik* to the laboratory, Blake sprang to his feet. As he did so, he clutched at the edge of the porcelain-topped table for support. It tilted slightly, and the bottle of glucose he had left there some time before slipped off and fell to the floor.

For a moment, the significance of this accident did not impress itself on his consciousness, so filled was his mind with what had taken place in the *salamlik*. Then he suddenly realized that he had moved a ponderable object with his hand. He was back in his earthly body once more, and could give battle to Friedl and his companions.

He rushed to the door, and turning the latch, found it locked. He was about to charge it with his shoulder, when the deep voice of the Stranger halted him.

"I wouldn't try that, doctor."

Blake wheeled around, and looked for the plant monstrosity which the Stranger had created some time before. It had disappeared completely, and he could see no sign of this strange entity from Mercury in any other physical form. A low chuckle, however, told the American that he was nearby.

"Why wouldn't you try it—wherever you are?" he asked.

"Because," replied the voice of the Stranger, "you would only get yourself shot again, and I just got through repairing you. A splendid job, too, if I do say so, myself. That's reason number one. And, reason number two: the events which you witnessed in the *salamlik* took place more than a half hour ago. The struggle is all over. I had to let you get accustomed to your body and the new cells I assembled and installed, before waking you. And that took about half an hour."

"Then you locked the door so I couldn't rush out?"

"Precisely."

"But what happened after I—er—left?" "Captain Speyer's bullet passed through Abdul Hafiz' *kufiyeh* and grazed his ear, but did him no harm. Then Lieutenant Hess struck the *shaykh* on the head with the butt of his pistol, rendering him unconscious. Soldiers carried him up to his *harim* and left him there. And Nuralayn, fighting her captors like a young wildcat, was taken to the quarters of Captain Speyer."

"Hell's bells! Let me out of here!"

"Wait. Nuralayn has not been harmed. And Speyer will be busy for a while with military matters. The caravan which arrived some time ago consisted of about two hundred Nazi soldiers disguised as desert Arabs. The men of the *shaykh's* household have been disarmed, and put to work, constructing underground hangars for the first fleet of planes that is to be summoned by radio as soon as construction is completed. Captain Speyer, disguised in *kufiyeh* and cloak, in case British airmen should pass over, is superintending the work."

"And I suppose the house is full of Speyer's armed guards."

"Right. Furthermore, Friedl, who is overseeing the installation of the new radio station, will remember about your body being here in the laboratory, and will bring soldiers to remove it soon, as he wants the laboratory for himself. You still have two wishes left, and I'll consider it a personal favor if you'll make them and get it over with. I have important duties of my own to attend to."

A number of wishes flashed through Blake's mind. A gun. A suit of bullet-proof armor. A disguise. A regiment of soldiers. Then, he reflected, all of these things might or might not save Nuralayn and defeat Doctor Friedl, Captain Speyer and their confederates. He must make his wish take in a lot of territory.

"For wish number two," he said, "I want you to help me defeat the purposes of Captain Speyer, his confederates and associates."

"I felt that one coming," said the Stranger. "But I don't blame you. It's a composite wish, and one not so easily gratified, even by me. I could, of course, bring certain forces to bear, and instantly destroy Captain Speyer and his confederates. But that is not my way—it would be like a man ruthlessly shooting a harmless songbird or a helpless domestic animal, unable to defend itself."

"I don't get the analogy," retorted Blake. "This bunch is more like a nest of poisonous snakes than a flock of harmless birds or beasts."

"That is from your prejudiced viewpoint, only," said the Stranger. "I look on them more tolerantly. However, they are your enemies and you have expressed your wish, which I am ethically obligated to perform. But, I must tell you from the start that the outcome will be in doubt until the end. We *jinn* are powerful, but not omnipotent."

Suddenly, at the point from which the voice had been coming, Blake saw a human figure appear. It was an exact replica of himself, even to his clothing and the sun-bleached hair at his temples.

"What the—!" began Blake in amazement.

"How do you like it?" asked the figure, in the deep voice of the Stranger, whirling around at the same time so he could get a complete view.

"What's the idea of mimicing *my* looks?" Blake asked. "And how did you do it so quickly?"

"All part of my plan," the Stranger told him. "I can't bring myself to destroy these conspirators, any more than you could bring yourself to shoot an unsuspecting man in the back. It wouldn't be sporting—would be entirely too easy.

"As for materializing quickly, as a matter of fact, I didn't. But, while I was materializing this primary body, I remained invisible to you. It is not as complicated as yours, inside. However, as it will serve as a parent body, it had to be endowed with a lot of extra cells."

"A parent body? What do you mean?"

"Watch."

While Blake looked on, dumfounded, the body suddenly divided—became two identical bodies.

"Multiplication by fission," said the Stranger. "Although you complicated organisms can't do it, many protozoans of your world do it right along. A parent becomes two daughters, or sons—it doesn't matter which—for they are sexless. They, in turn, divide in two, and so on."

The body on the left had been speaking. Now, the body on the right interrupted.

"Why tell him all that? He's a microbiologist."

Blake's astonishment increased, as the body on the left replied:

"True. I'd forgotten that for the moment, I was so busy creating us. All right, get over there in front of the window."

The body on the right walked over and stood in front of the window, facing the door. The one on the left strode to the door, then wheeled about, facing the other. In the right hand blossomed a silenced Luger. It coughed once, and the body in front of the window collapsed, drilled between the eyes. It lay just as Blake had lain only a short time before, apparently dead.

"I don't know whether to call that fratricide, parricide, infanticide, or just plain homicide," said Blake. "Why did you do it?"

His double grinned at him from the doorway, as the voice of the Stranger replied through its lips:

"Had to have a body, didn't we? The whole show would be given away, otherwise. This body, which will be carted off and buried by Speyer's men, will make them think you are dead. Also, it will help me to carry out some initial plans I have in mind."

"But the other body spoke—showed intelligence. It was alive, and you killed it."

"It contained a part of my ego—or life essence," said the Stranger. "But I have taken that back. It is nothing, now, but a lifeless conglomerate of matter without mind."

"Where did you get that pistol?" Blake asked. "You didn't split that off from you by fission."

"True. I materialized it, as I did this primary body. But it is much simpler. A ferric compound lubricated with a carbon compound. The grips, also, are a carbon compound, the ammunition, carbon and nitrogen compounds with some brass and lead. The water pipes in this place are a bit thinner because of the metals. The rest came from the air and the H₂O and CO₂ in suspension in it. I don't need it any longer."

He hurled it away from him, straight at the window, and Blake waited for a crash of glass that would arouse the guards. But none came. The weapon vanished before it reached the window.

"That will add a bit to the thickness of the water pipes," said the Stranger.

To Blake, it seemed more incredible that an individual with such powers should be absent-minded, than the marvellous powers, themselves. But the Stranger certainly showed signs of absent-mindedness. Evidently he sometimes concentrated so deeply on what he was doing that insignificant details, for the moment, were blanked from his consciousness.

At this moment, the tramp of heavily shod feet sounded on the tiled floor of the hallway outside.

"They are coming for the body," said the Stranger. "I'll make us invisible. Say nothing and leave things to me."



CHAPTER SEVEN

Fire of the Eyes

As the sound of advancing feet drew closer, Blake's companion suddenly disappeared from sight. So, also, did Blake. He couldn't even see his hand held in front of his face, though he could see all other objects in the room clearly, save the Stranger.

The door latch rattled, there was a muffled exclamation, and then some one turned the key, which was on the outside. The door swung open, and Friedl stepped in. He still wore his white suit, and on his head was a cork helmet, set at a rakish angle.

Behind him came four goose-stepping guards.

"Pick up that carcass," commanded Friedl. "And take it—"

His words were cut short as his helmet was suddenly and violently jammed down over his ears by an invisible hand.

"Who did that?" he barked, looking accusingly at the four guards.

The nearest replied:

"We don't know. It was not one of us."

"It was a poltergeist," said the man next to him.

"*Esel!*" said Friedl, adjusting his helmet. "There is no such thing as a poltergeist. Pick up this carcass and throw it to the jackals. Don't bother to bury—"

Again his order was interrupted, this time by something which seized his ankles and jerked his legs out from under him. As he struck the floor, both of his shoes were violently pulled off, then flung out through the doorway into the hall. His helmet, which had fallen off, was picked up and also, thrown into the hall.

"Pick it up yourself, Doctor Friedl," ordered the deep voice of the invisible Stranger. "You are the murderer."

For a moment, Friedl lay there, dazed.

The four guards with cries of: "The poltergeist! It will get us next!" turned and fled.

Scrambling to his feet, Friedl attempted to follow them, but was caught by the scruff of the neck and jerked back.

Again the deep voice commanded:

"Pick up the body. Take it out and give it decent burial—or you'll hear from me again."

Pale with fear, Friedl stooped, lifted the body to his shoulder, and staggered out through the door with it. The door slammed shut behind him, and the Stranger, holding the latch, suddenly became visible once more, as did Blake.

"I don't like to destroy these creatures of puny intellect," mumbled the Stranger, grinning, "unless it is necessary. But sometimes it amuses me to chastise them a bit—when they deserve it."

"I kinda got a bang out of it, myself," admitted Blake. "What do you think he'll do, now?"

"Undoubtedly he now believes in poltergeists. He'll probably give the body decent burial, and try to exorcise the ghost which he believes attacked him. And now, to make us invisible once more, so we can clean up this job."

"By the way, how do you do it?" asked Blake, as both he and the Stranger seemed to dissolve into thin air once more.

"Always the curious scientist," twitted the Stranger. "You want to know the how and why of everything. I do it by changing the reflective angles of skin, hair and clothing, so that they will no longer reflect or absorb the visible light rays. Instead, they bend them. The single octave of light rays visible to the human eye now passes entirely around this

body and yours, without being either reflected or absorbed. And now that we are both invisible once more, we'll go to Nuralayn. Come on."

The door swung open, and Blake started to walk through, but collided with the Stranger.

"Here, this won't do," said the latter. "You'll be getting in my way. I'll just make the infra red rays emitted by our bodies visible to you, so that won't happen again. Stand still for a minute."

Blake stood still, and in a moment, the outline of the Stranger's body glowed a dull red. Also, he could now see his own body with the same weird coloring.

"The human eye is sensitive, normally, to only one light octave out of fifty-five," said the Stranger. "I've extended your vision a bit on the red end of the spectrum, so you can see rays which are invisible to other humans, though they could be seen by some insects, or recorded by a properly sensitized camera plate."

They circled the balcony, passing six guards armed with rifles and posted at various intervals on the way, and, at its farther end, the Stranger paused before a door which stood open, and from which came the sound of guttural German voices.

"From now on," said the Stranger, "we'll communicate by telepathy. Don't speak. Just *think* your speech, and I'll do the same. You will seem to hear me, and will understand, but it will not be perceptible to the minds of others."

He walked silently into the room, Blake at his heels.

Friedl, his usually immaculate clothing disheveled, and smeared with blood from the body he had been compelled to carry, was pouring himself a stiff brandy from one of the captain's bottles, his flushed face indicating that this had not been the first.

Captain Speyer, his Arab disguise discarded in favor of his uniform, was seated in an easy chair, smoking a cigar.

"Stuff and nonsense," the captain was saying. "Poltergeist! And you call yourself a scientist and a practical man."

"But I tell you there is no other explanation," expostulated Friedl, after gulping the liquor. "The four men who now have charge of the body saw and heard what happened."

"And so you want me to get the chaplain to bury the body, and lay the ghost. All right, I'll do it to humor you. Clear out, now, and send the chaplain to me. Then get busy and help superintend the digging. I'll be otherwise and more pleasantly occupied for the next hour or so. The fair Nuralayn is impatiently awaiting my presence in the next room."

He rose, and walked over to the taborette, where he helped himself to a brandy and soda.

"Have another with me before you go, Herr Doktor," he said, pouring a neat four fingers for Friedl, "and wish me joy."

"I can use another," Friedl replied, picking it up.

The Stranger silently walked to the doorway which separated the two rooms of the captain's apartment, and drew back the curtain for Blake to enter.

Nuralayn, bound hand and foot, lay on a divan among the silken cushions. Although her eyes showed that she had been weeping, the tears still clinging to her long, curved lashes, no sound escaped her, and there was a defiant look in her eyes as she struggled to free herself from her bonds. Her clothing was torn and disarranged as if she had had a terrific struggle with her captors, and her beaded *yashmak* hung loose at one side.

"You'll have to appear to her naturally, so she won't think you a ghost," telepathed the Stranger. "Go over to the head of

the divan so she won't see you until you speak to her."

Blake complied, and an instant later, his body became fully visible.

"Don't be afraid, Nuralayn," he said softly. "It is I, Hakim Blake, come to rescue you."

She looked up at him, her eyes wide with astonishment, as he took out his pocket knife and cut her bonds.

"My *hakim*," she said softly, as he chafed her wrists. "I knew you would come, even though they told me you were dead. You look exactly as I saw you in my dreams, even to your hair that has been bleached at the temples by the sun."

She raised her hand and softly stroked his hair, and Blake, looking down at her lovely face, saw a starry light in her eyes that drew him irresistibly. Suddenly, he took her in his arms, crushing her warm, red lips with his. She responded to his kiss with a passion that sent him into a seventh heaven of ecstasy, and, for the moment, the peril which menaced them both was forgotten. Then she went limp, and he saw that she had fainted.

"All right, break the clinch, and don't try to revive her, now," telepathed the Stranger. "We'll have to work fast."

Blake put the girl down, then turned and gasped in amazement. A living duplicate of Nuralayn was looking at him, and the infra-red outline of the Stranger had disappeared. Swiftly, the new body divided into two which looked exactly alike. One spoke in a voice that exactly mimicked that of Nuralayn.

"I am Naralayn," said the figure. "I will take the place of Nuralayn."

"And while she does that," said the deep voice of the Stranger, issuing incongruously from the other female figure, "we'll take Nuralayn to her father."

"*Nar al ayn*. Fire of the Eyes," Blake translated to himself. "Oh, boy! I'll bet this will be good!"

"It will," rumbled the Stranger. "Too bad you can't stay to witness it. Bring your beloved, and we'll go."

As Blake picked up the unconscious Nuralayn, the Stranger once more rendered them both invisible, save for the infra-red which Blake could now see.

The Stranger opened the door which led into the hallway, and they went out, just as the heavy tread of Captain Speyer sounded at the doorway which connected the two rooms.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Magician

Out in the hallway the Stranger telepathed:

"I'll leave you, now, as I have some matters to attend to. Go straight to the *harim*, and when you have passed through the door, you and Nuralayn will become visible once more."

With these words the Stranger disappeared.

Silently, Blake trod past guard after guard, carrying his precious burden, until he came to the door of the *harim*, where two soldiers stood guard with bayonets fixed. He walked between them without making a sound, then raised the curtain and stepped inside the hallway. As he did so, both he and Nuralayn became visible once more, and Mahmood, the eunuch, who had been dozing on a bench at one side, sprang to his feet and cried: "*Destooir!*"

Then, suddenly recognizing the two who had just come in, and believing Blake to be an apparition, he sank down upon his knees, trembling violently with fright.

His first shout had brought a number of curious, veiled faces to the curtained doorways. At sight of the two who had just entered, there were murmurs of surprise and incredulity.

"Get up and take me to your master," Blake ordered. "Can't you see that I am alive? Could a spirit carry the daughter of Abdul Hafiz?"

Shamefacedly, the eunuch got to his feet.

"Harkening and obedience, *sidi*," he said, then drew aside the curtain of the first doorway on the right for them to enter.

As Blake stepped through the doorway, he was met and welcomed by the *shaykh*, himself, who had heard the commotion and was coming out to investigate. The folds of a white bandage showed on his brow beneath his *kufiyeh*, but he appeared as vigorous as ever.

"*Alhamdulillah!*" he exclaimed. "Praise God for one true friend among so many deceitful enemies!" He looked down at the senseless girl in Blake's arms. "Is she—" he began anxiously.

"She is unharmed, and has only fainted," Blake told him.

"*Ya, Marjanah!*" the *shaykh* shouted.

The big, capable nurse came bustling out of Nuralayn's suite, and at sight of Blake's burden, began alternately praising Allah and cooing over her little white dove.

Blake placed the girl tenderly in her bed, and then left her to the ministrations of her capable nurse, insisting that the *sharif* come with him.

"She has had a terrible shock," he told the old man. "Let her rest for a while. You can come in to see her after she has recovered consciousness. It would not be wise to awaken her now."

"I bow to your superior wisdom, Hakim Blake," Abdul Hafiz said. "Come to my apartment. We'll smoke a pipe and discuss the predicament in which we find ourselves. Perhaps there will be some way out of the trap."

Captain Speyer, about to enter the room where he believed Nuralayn to be lying, bound and helpless, was interrupted by a rap on the door of his apartment.

"Who's there?" he called.

"Sergeant Weiss with a prisoner."

The captain was annoyed by this interruption, yet curious as to who the prisoner might be. He decided on a swift investigation.

"Bring the prisoner in," he commanded.

The sergeant opened the door, and an old, gray bearded *darweesh* was pushed roughly into the room by his two guards.

"Where did you get this, sergeant?" asked the captain.

"He just rode up to the gate on a white mule, and told the guard he wished to pay a visit to the *shaykh*."

"So. Who are you, old man?"

"Shaykh Yahya of the Ahmediyeh Darweesh, excellency, at your service," the old man replied.

"Indeed. And pray, what service can you perform for me?"

"I can perform feats of jugglery and magic to amuse your household," said the old fellow. "Behold."

So saying, he plucked at the end of the sergeant's nose, and produced a silver coin. This he appeared to thrust up his own nostril, but a moment later brought out a long black cigar. He rubbed this between his palms and opening them, disclosed a small ivory cigarette case, which he presented to the captain with a bow. Then he paused, as if waiting for the officer's approbation.

The latter stared intently at him for a moment—then suddenly stepped forward and grasping the long white beard, gave it a terrific jerk. It came away in his hand, and he followed up by knocking off the tall dervish hat, and stripping off a pair of false eyebrows, revealing a man who looked not much more than thirty-five, with a jet black beard.

"Hagg Nadeem," he said. "So you thought you could fool me with that childish disguise."

"I admit I was doubtful," replied the *hagg*, returning his stern gaze unflinchingly. "However, I did not expect to be brought before you—did not, in fact, expect to find you in charge here so soon."

"So—my plans were known to you. Then why didn't you take action before?"

"You *Farangh* have a saying: 'Give a dog enough rope and he'll hang himself,'" replied the *hagg*.

"So you were not sure, and came here in this ridiculous disguise to investigate."

"Perhaps."

"Ah. You wish to be evasive. Well, we have means of making you talk. However, I haven't time to bother with you for the moment. Take him away, sergeant. Lock him up and set two guards to watch him. He is a magician, and a master of illusion, so see that he plays no tricks on you. I'll attend to him later. But first, to more pressing business."

As the *hagg* was dragged out, he turned once more to the door which led to his bedroom.

Passing through, he was amazed to see that his fair prisoner was unbound, and reclining on the *diwan*, smoking one of his cigarettes.

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting, my dear," he said, advancing toward her. "However, we can make up for lost time now, can't we?"

"Of course, captain, if you wish it," she responded, with a sweet submissiveness that astounded him. "Here, sit beside me and let me make you comfortable."

Scarcely crediting the evidence of his senses, the captain sat down on the *diwan*.

She took one of his cigarettes and placed it between his lips. Then, ignoring the lighter that stood on the taborette, she held a pink fingertip to the end of the cigarette, and it began to smoke and glow.

"What the—"

But she interrupted: "You've been holding out on me. How about a drink?"

"Sorry. I didn't know you used liquor." He started to rise, but she pushed him back.

"Don't bother. I'll get it. Make yourself comfortable."

She went into the other room and returning with the brandy bottle and glasses, poured a drink for each of them.

The captain took the proffered glass, and they clinked the rims together.

"To our love," he said.

"To our burning love," she replied, and touched her red lips to the liquid, whereupon a blue flame sprang up on its surface. She palmed it, and the flame went out.

The captain was goggle-eyed.

"Pretty tricks you have with fire," he said. "Where did you learn them?"

"Pooh. Those were nothing," she replied. "Watch."

She took the drink of brandy into her mouth, and a moment later, exhaled blue flames through her lips and nostrils.

"Good God, girl! You'll burn yourself!" exclaimed the captain.

"Not at all," she replied. "Naralayn never burns herself."

"Naralayn! But I thought your name was Nuralayn."

"A mistake," she replied. "And now that we have enjoyed a drink and a cigarette together, I'll run along."

"No you don't, young lady," he replied. "I see it all, now. You and your father's friend, Hagg Nadeem, have cooked up some magical tricks to frighten me. But I am not easily frightened. You remain in this apartment with me. You are mine."

He sprang to his feet, seized her in his arms, and pressed his lips to hers. But in that instant, he drew back and released her with a howl of pain. It was as if he had embraced a being of white hot metal. His uniform was charred and smouldering; his hands and lips were blistered from the intense heat.

"You she-devil!" he roared between blistered lips, as he beat out the sparks. "You have gone too far." He whipped out his Luger, but before he could raise it to fire, it too became white hot, exploded in his hand, and turned to a cloud of intensely hot gas.

As he recoiled, roaring with pain, from the terrific heat of that cloud of gaseous metal, Naralayn suddenly disappeared—melted into nothingness before his eyes.

The captain sagged down on the diwan, then reached for the brandy bottle with his left hand; the other was useless. He took a huge pull at the bottle, then another and another, until he had drained it. Hurling it against the wall, he got to his feet and staggered into the other room, bawling loudly for the guard. Two soldiers came running.

Captain Speyer confronted the first.

"Look at me," he said. "Have I been burned, or is this an illusion?"

"It is obvious that you have been badly burned, herr captain," said the soldier. "Your uniform, your face and your hands. I'll call Doctor Friedl."

"Get him quickly, for I am in great pain. The black magic of Hagg Nadeem has done this, and he'll not live long to boast about it."

While Captain Speyer was waiting for the doctor, a Galla slave girl wearing a white veil was admitted by the guard.

"Well. What news from the *harim*? Speak up," said the captain.

"The white *hakim* is not dead," said the girl. "A short time ago he came into the *harim* carrying the master's daughter, who had fainted. I was unable to get away to tell you until now, as I believe they suspect me of spying for you."

"So Blake isn't really dead? More of Hagg Nadeem's magic, eh? We'll put an end to this, once and for all. Before this day is over they'll all be dead, and this time they won't come to life."

CHAPTER NINE

The Colonel

Blake had drunk a cup of coffee, and was smoking and chatting with the *shaykh* when Nuralayn, accompanied by the hovering Marjanah, came into the room, and running to her father, flung her arms around his neck.

Both wept with joy at this miraculous reunion and Blake, feeling a lump rising in his throat, poured himself another cup of the blistering hot syrupy coffee and downed it at a gulp. Then, while he puffed vigorously at his bubbling *shisha* to hide his emotion, Nuralayn told her father all she remembered about her rescue. When she had concluded she looked at the young scientist with proud love-filled eyes and said:

"And now my *hakim*, there is something you would say to father."

"That's true," Blake replied. "I love your daughter, *ya shaykh*, and ask her hand in marriage, if and when we get out of this alive."

Abdul Hafiz looked shocked and amazed.

"You are my best friend, Hakim Blake," he said, "for no other has done me such a great favor during my lifetime. It pains me, therefore, to tell you that I cannot ever consent to such a marriage. A *Feringhi* cannot marry a *Muslimah*, and particularly, the daughter of a descendent of the Prophet. You know that would be contrary to our laws and customs."

"I respect your feeling and your beliefs," Blake answered. "But, *sidi*, love is something which recognizes no barriers. I ___"

He was interrupted by the sudden and precipitate entrance of a squad of soldiers, headed by Sergeant Weiss.

"You are all under arrest," he said. "Seize them, men."

As they sprang to their feet, Nuralayn, the *shaykh* and Blake were seized by the soldiers, who quickly bound their arms behind them. Marjanah, when she attempted to accompany her mistress, was pushed back by the sergeant.

"We only want these three at present," he said. "The others will be attended to later."

They were hustled down to the courtyard, where Captain Speyer, wearing a new uniform, with bandages on his hands and gauze patches on his face, sat at a table with Lieutenant Hess on one side and Doctor Friedl on the other, flanked by two squads of soldiers.

In front of the table, with his hands bound behind him, stood Hagg Nadeem.

As the other three prisoners were ranged alongside the *haag*, Speyer glanced at each in turn with equal malignancy. It was obvious that he had not only been cured of his infatuation for Nuralayn, but that he hated her as thoroughly as the others.

"I am a man of few words," he said. "All four of you have conspired to play tricks on me which no man could forgive, and which I have the power to punish. And, since you saw fit to burn me, why you'll all get a dose of the same medicine. I hereby sentence you all to be burned at the stake. That, regardless of the magical powers of Hagg Nadeem, will put a fitting end to your tricks."

At a sign from him, four men came in bearing a large post from which strong chains dangled. Others brought firewood and cans of gasoline, and placing these in readiness, took up several flag-stones and began excavating a hole for the post.

Blake was wondering, at the moment, what had become of the Stranger. The latter, after agreeing to fulfill his second wish, had completely disappeared. Could he be somewhere nearby, waiting to come to their assistance? Or had he left them to their fate?

The digging progressed rapidly, and the post was soon tamped into place. The wood was heaped around it, and the four condemned prisoners were boosted up on this and bound with the chains.

Sergeant Weiss was opening one of the gasoline tins when suddenly the roar of a huge trimotored plane became audible. A moment later, the radio operator hurried down from the station and handed a message to Captain Speyer.

After perusing it, the captain called to the sergeant.

"Hold the execution," he said. "Colonel Grebner will be here in a few moments, to take command of the garrison, and he desires to see it."

The plane landed a few minutes later, on the smooth sand outside the courtyard walls.

All officers and men snapped stiffly to attention as the colonel, followed by two aides, came pompously through the courtyard gate.

Colonel Grebner was a short, stocky man, with a tiny, bristling moustache and an underslung jaw. A shell-rimmed monocle dangled from a thin black cord in his breast pocket. His bearing reminded Blake of the strut of a bantam rooster.

"What's this I hear about an execution, captain?" he said. "Ah, four prisoners bound to the stake. And one a girl. Well, well. What dastardly crimes have they committed, and what is the military necessity for this execution?"

"Espionage, and conspiracy to burn the commanding officer to death," replied the captain.

"You do look as if you'd been pretty badly singed," said the colonel, eyeing the captain's bandages through his monocle. "How did it happen?"

"It was done through the black magic of Hagg Nadeem, after he came here to spy on the encampment. I can offer no logical explanation for the tricks that were played upon me and upon Doctor Friedl. Only a magician could explain them. All I know is that their results were unpleasant, and decidedly dangerous."

The colonel cocked an eyebrow, fixed the monocle in his eye, and stared for a moment at the four chained prisoners.

"Hm. Desperate looking characters," he said. "But I must remind you, Captain Speyer, that we don't burn prisoners at the stake. A barbarous custom. We are a civilized race."

He let the monocle fall from his eye and turned to the sergeant.

"Remove the chains," he ordered.

"Do you mean that you are going to let them go free?" asked the captain, amazed.

"Free? Of course not. We'll shoot them in the approved civilized fashion. And we'll let their swift demise be a lesson to the rest of the natives, so there'll be no recurrence of such tricks against officers. Have every living soul in the castle brought into the courtyard to witness the execution."

Captain Speyer saluted, and gave the necessary orders, while the colonel, once more fixing his monocle in his eye, watched the unchaining of the prisoners with no more emotion than if he had been watching an orderly polish his boots.

CHAPTER TEN

The Firing Squad

With everyone assembled in the courtyard the four prisoners were lined up against the wall. Every soldier with a rifle was pressed into the firing squad. They formed two lines of a hundred men each, one line kneeling in a semicircle, the other standing in a slightly wider semicircle behind them.

As he stood facing this double crescent of rifles, Blake's heart sank. Obviously, the Stranger had deserted him—left him to his fate. Now he must not only go through the unpleasant ordeal of dying once more—in addition, he must witness the violent death of the person he held most dear in all the world, as well as her father and Hagg Nadeem.

The colonel himself, standing to one side, gave the orders.

Cartridges clicked into the chambers at his command. Rifles were raised, and the four doomed prisoners suddenly found themselves looking into two hundred deadly black muzzles.

Then suddenly, an astonishing thing happened. The rifles began to writhe in the hands of the soldiers as if alive. Staring in astonishment, Blake saw that they were not rifles, but serpents, huge, thick-bodied pythons, their powerful constrictor muscles showing beneath their flashing scales as they turned on the men who held them.

In an instant, the entire company was struggling, screaming, rolling about on the ground in a mad tangle of frightened men and squirming, slithering serpents, each slowly but surely pinning a man in its crushing folds.

Captain Speyer, standing beside the colonel and his aides, with Lieutenant Hess and Doctor Friedl, suddenly went berserk.

"More of Hagg Nadeem's magic!" he shrieked. "The ancient black magic of Egypt. They turned rods into serpents, why not guns? But this black magician shall not live to boast of it."

He whipped out his Luger, leveled it at Hagg Nadeem. But before he could pull the trigger, it, too, became a serpent, smaller than the others but more deadly—an African cobra. It twined its tail about his wrist, then struck once, plunging its fangs into his cheek.

The captain collapsed, and writhed on the ground in agony, while Doctor Friedl and Lieutenant Hess looked on helpless, afraid to draw their own pistols lest they, too, should turn to serpents and destroy them.

Standing back near the ring of frightened and awed natives and members of the *harim* with an orderly on each side of him, Colonel Grebner watched the scene impassively through his gleaming monocle. It did not seem to excite, or even interest him, and Blake, noticing this, wondered if he and his two aides had been hypnotized.

Then the scientists and his fellow prisoners suddenly saw another amazing transformation. The serpents coiled around their helpless victims began to turn to ropes, and every soldier present lay on the ground, bound and helpless, save the colonel, his two orderlies, Dr. Friedl and Lieutenant Hess. Even the captain's cobra had drawn his hands behind his back, where they were tightly bound to a loop around his ankles, and had turned to a stout rope.

Blake knew that this could not be the magic of Hagg Nadeem. He knew that the Stranger must be somewhere nearby, and momentarily expected to hear his deep chuckle. Perhaps he was invisible. Or it might be that he was one of the people standing in the courtyard. In any event, he decided that it was about time to take some action, remembering the Stranger's injunction to help himself if he wished to be helped.

"Come on," he shouted to the awed, staring natives. "Seize and bind these others. Make them all prisoners."

They needed no second invitation. Mahmood, the eunuch, leaped at Doctor Friedl from behind, seized his pistol, and pinioned his arms behind him. Other stout retainers of Abdul Hafiz quickly subdued Lieutenant Hess. But when, led by Blake, they charged the colonel and his aides, they suddenly were not there. In their places stood a tall, scrawny Bedouin between two large camels.

Blake stopped, facing the camel driver.

"So, it was you!" he exclaimed, "I thought you'd gone away and forgotten me."

"You did me an injustice," replied the camel driver, in the deep voice of the Stranger. "Entering the plane of the colonel, making him and his aides my prisoners, and impersonating all three as we flew toward the castle took some time. I have been quite busy on your behalf."

By this time, the *shaykh*, Nuralayn and Hagg Nadeem had come up.

"*Wallahi!*" exclaimed the *hagg*, looking closely at the Stranger. "I know you now. I am of the people who have known yours for a thousand years."

"A seventh son of a seventh son for more than a thousand generations," replied the Stranger. "I recognize you, Hagg Nadeem, as a member of one of the families that have always cooperated with my people, and who have thereby earned the reputation of being black magicians."

"*Astagfurullah!*" exclaimed the *shaykh*. "I take refuge with Allah! A *jinni!*"

"The same, O cousin of the Prophet," rumbled the Stranger. "And fortunately for you and yours, a friend of your friend, Hakim Blake. I should have said, your future son-in-law, Hakim Blake."

"But that is impossible, O emir among the *jinn*," said the *shaykh*. "Our laws—"

"Need not be violated," interrupted the Stranger. "With Allah all is possible. You object to him on religious grounds. Yet, if he were to testify to the unity of Allah—"

"If he were to testify, I could accept him into my family."

"Then it is simple. Blake, my friend, since you are a Unitarian, I'm sure you can testify with conviction, and bless the Prophet without equivocation."

"*La illallah ilallah. Mohammed ur rasul ullah. Salah alahu aleyhi wa selem,*" testified Blake.

"And that settles that," said the Stranger. "Now, Hagg Nadeem, you have only to load your prisoners on these camels, with the help of the *shaykh's* men, and take them to Mecca. You'll find the colonel and his two aides lying bound in their plane."

"But, all these men and only two camels!" exclaimed Hagg Nadeem. Then he turned with a surprised: "*Subhanullah!*" For, instead of two camels there were now sixty-four. While they talked, the two had been swiftly multiplying by fission.

The *hagg* turned and bowed to the Stranger.

"May Allah return your kindness a thousand fold, O prince of the *jinn*," he said.

"And after, what shall I do with the camels."

"They will accompany you to the city gate—the Bab el Ma'la," the Stranger told him. "After that, there will be no camels."

As Hagg Nadeem hurried off to give orders about loading his prisoners for the trek across the desert, the Stranger turned to Blake and smiled when he saw him standing with his arm about the slender waist of Nuralayn.

"And now, friend Blake," he said, "what is your third wish? I've other matters to attend to, so think fast."

"And I," replied Blake, "thanks to you, have everything a man could wish for, and more than I could ever have hoped for. My third wish, then, is to wish you luck, and a safe and pleasant journey home when your investigation is ended."

The Stranger, without another word, faded from view. The *shaykh* hurried away to assist Hagg Nadeem in overseeing the loadings of his prisoners on the camels. Blake, looking at the nearest of these, was astounded to see it wink at him.

The Stranger, he mused, or at least one of his descendants, was still near him, carrying out his wish—no, not one, sixty-four of them.

Together, he and Nuralayn turned and entered the castle.

THE END.

[The end of *Stranger from smallness* by Otis Adelbert Kline]