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TOWERS OF DEATH
doom in the crystal ball: By Henry Kuttner
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Towers of Death

By
HENRY KUTTNER

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The old man dallied with evil magic, and sought to double his span of life at his nephew's expense, but the world ended for him at the Towers of Silence in a Persian cemetery



A blast of searing flame poured out through the portal

Simeon Gerard leaned forward in the great leather chair. His white, withered face showed no trace of expression as he said, "I am to die in a month, then?"

Doctor Stone hesitated. He felt ill at ease in this great, high-ceilinged room, dimly lit by the red glow of a dying fire. The pungent smoke that curled up from swinging censers tickled his throat. And this strange, shrunken man before him only added to the physician's discomfort. Though Stone had attended Gerard for years, he had always felt a vague, indefinable dislike for the old eccentric. He could not have told exactly why.

Simeon Gerard held up a claw of a hand and looked at the fire through its translucent parchment. "A month, you say?" he repeated.

"Roughly, I should say so," Doctor Stone said, more loudly than he had intended. His round, well-shaved face glistened in the reddish glow. "You may live much longer—you may die tonight. Frankly, Gerard, I warned you this was coming."

For a moment the old man's pale blue eyes turned to the doctor. A mocking, smile seemed to dance in their depths. "You should have attended Des Esseintes," he said.

Stone missed the allusion to Huysman's character. He went on stolidly, "This hobby of yours—from a moral standpoint, I have nothing to say. It's none of my business. But it has undermined your health. If you wanted to play with occultism——"

"What?" Gerard's tufted eyebrows lifted.

"Well—devil-worship, then! Praying to Satan and holding Black Masses, or whatever it is—that was your affair. But I know quite well that you've been taking some poisonous drug or other, against my orders, and doing God knows what else."

"I have made—experiments," Gerard admitted.

The physician shrugged. "There's nothing more to be said. I advise you to get your affairs in order. I'll come whenever you need me. Perhaps I had better leave these——" He laid a small bottle upon a nearby table, and hesitated slightly before resuming. "There will be pain, I'm afraid. Great pain."

Gerard stood up. A spasm crossed his wrinkled face, but he repressed it immediately. Standing straight and still by the fire, he murmured, "I shall not need you again, Stone. Take your opiate with you. I shall not require it, or you. Send your bill to me, or to my heir. Good evening."

He made no offer to shake hands, and, after an awkward pause, Doctor Stone went to the door and let himself out of the house.

Gerard remained unmoving, thinking. His thin lips twisted into an ironic grimace. Stone—how little the stupid fool guessed of his patient's "experiments." No doubt the doctor considered him an eccentric, senile idiot, mumbling the Lord's Prayer backward to an inverted crucifix. There were older deities than Lucifer. . . .

There was Ahriman.

Years before, some quirk in Gerard's neurotic mind had started him on the little-trodden pathway. At first, blindly studying and experimenting with the familiar superficialities of occultism, he had searched for a thrill, something to spur his jaded senses. Then, later, he had visited the Orient, had visited certain forbidden sects and temples, and had learned much. A renegade priest of Ormuzd helped him secure a number of secret and very old manuscripts hidden in Teheran, and had introduced him into a cult which the authorities did not know existed. For the first time Gerard learned of the Dark Wisdom, and realized that his haphazard delvings had been superficial indeed.

He had come back to America changed. At first he plunged into a riotous life of sensuality, but that did not last long. The next phase was a period of intensive study, of long letters

exchanged with men whose addresses were always mysterious post-office boxes, and of innumerable additions to his already large library. Stone built a home in the country, employing dark, foreign-looking workmen, and retired there with a few Oriental servants. He still lived here, though a small city had grown up around him during the course of years.

So Doctor Stone suspected some poisonous drug! If that smug worthy actually had any idea of the nature of his patient's "experiments," he would undoubtedly have summoned the police and a priest as well, Gerard thought. For fifty years Simeon Gerard had gratified his every wish—and some of them had been monstrous indeed. A bargain of that nature is not paid for lightly. Yet—and Gerard smiled a little—the demands had not been hard to fulfil. As a millionaire, silent partner in a dozen flourishing businesses, he had acquired money; and through his own efforts he had made various desirable underworld connections—desirable, because it was necessary at times to procure quite illegal commodities . . . but Gerard was careful, and only one man besides himself knew of a strangely-shaped altar in a subterranean room under the house—an altar stained blackly with dried blood.

That man was Dagh Ziaret, a Persian. He owned a tiny, dark art shop in a slum district of the city, though most of his business was transacted downstairs in a cellar that resembled an alchemist's retreat.

Gerard thought of Dagh Ziaret now. Undoubtedly the Persian could give him the aid he needed. But first——

He reached for a telephone and called his attorney.

"Morton? I've just had bad news. My doctor tells me I'm dying. . . . Don't be a hypocritical fool. I've no time to listen to your lies. You are *not* sorry. . . . I want to transfer all my possessions to my nephew, Steven. What? No, I want this done while I'm alive. Prepare the document and bring it to my home in—well—an hour. . . . Good."

Gerard next telephoned Steven and made an appointment for later in the evening. Finally he sent a message, through an intermediary, to a man whose illegal activities included the supplying of drugged victims to a crimp, who in turn found them berths on various ships. Since none of Gerard's underworld helpers had ever seen his face, he felt quite safe in making his arrangements.

All was ready, now. Gerard called a taxi and had himself driven to within a few blocks of Dagh Ziaret's shop. He walked the rest of the distance, not without considerable pain. Yes, his experiments had taken their toll.

The Persian shuffled into view from behind a counter. He was a bent, skinny man whose kinky white beard was in startling contrast to his swarthy skin. Blinking black eyes scrutinized the visitor closely.

Then, without a word, Dagh Ziaret turned and moved to the back of the shop. Opening a heavy door, he descended steep stairs, Gerard at his heels, and unlocked a panel of massive metal. The two men crossed the threshold. Dagh Ziaret barred the door behind them.

The air was musty and stagnant, filled with a choking and strangely sweet musk-perfume. Oil lamps threw out wan circles of yellow light. Gerard's footsteps rang with a hollow sound on the wooden floor, as though another chamber existed below. He suspected this to be the case, but had no means of knowing.

The walls were entirely covered with shelves, on which stood an assortment of great bottles, alembics, retorts, and a myriad books, bound variously in parchment, vellum, leather,

and less easily recognizable substances. A few littered tables were here and there; on one of these was a large object covered by a black cloth.

Dagh Zialet coughed rackingly. "I do not think you will come here much longer, *effendi*," he said.

Gerard nodded. "Perhaps you are right."

The Persian leaned forward, his face twisted into a wrinkled mask. "I see death in your eyes."

The other laughed. "And you see it without your globe! Yet you may be mistaken, Dagh Zialet."

"No. The globe—wait. There may be——"

Muttering, he shuffled toward a table. He lifted the black cloth, revealing a crystal sphere, larger than a man's head, transparent and glittering in the lamplight.

"Sit down, *effendi*. There is a message, I think. Look. Already the globe clouds. . . ."

Smiling tolerantly, Gerard took his seat on one side of the table. The Persian sat across from him. The man's features were distorted through the crystal sphere. . . .

And the crystal clouded. It grew milkily translucent. Slowly the face of Dagh Zialet faded from view.

The Persian whispered, "The mists whirl and whirl. I see nothing clearly. Shadows. . . ."

"I do not even see those."

Dagh Zialet lifted his head sharply. "You see nothing? Truly?"

"Nothing but clouds within the crystal."

The Persian drew in his breath with a hissing sound. "There is a reason why this is hidden from you. Simeon Gerard, I see birds circling. . . ." The thin voice grew shrill, chanting. "Great birds that swoop against the sky, their cruel beaks open to rend and tear . . . there are vultures in the crystal, *effendi*! Birds of evil omen. . . ."

Despite himself, Gerard could not repress a slight chill. Impatiently he thrust his chair back and rose, wincing at a new twinge of pain. "Enough of that," he said harshly. "I have business to transact with you, Dagh Zialet."

The Persian replaced the black cloth. He, too, seemed uneasy. Rubbing his hands together, he glanced around and muttered, "In what way can I serve you?"

Carefully, measuring his words, Gerard spoke. "You have given me many drugs in the past. One of them sent my soul into a strange paradise——"

"A paradise? Nay!" And Dagh Zialet cackled mirthlessly. "Those who serve Ahriman may not enter any paradise!"

"You sent out my soul, nevertheless. This is truth?"

"It is indeed truth."

"And my soul returned to my body. So. Now, Dagh Zialet, what if it had instead entered another body?"

The Persian smiled, made a deprecating gesture. "This is madness. You cannot——"

Gerard held the other with his cold stare. "I too have learned much. And I know that it is *not* madness."

"I tell you that it is impossible."

"Impossible? With the blood of the black goat and the passion of the crucified serpent, and with——" Gerard leaned forward and whispered in the other's ear.

The Persian's dark face twisted. He ran shaking fingers through his beard. "Eh—you know of that? Yet the danger, *effendi*—we would walk on the brink of hell itself."

Gerard said, "I am rich."

"Aye. And I am poor. Now supposing that this thing can be done—that your mind and your soul can be made to enter into another body—what then?"

"Then I should not die," Gerard smiled. "And you would be wealthy indeed."

"There was death in your eyes," Dagh Zialet whispered, "and vultures in the crystal."

"That is my affair. Give me your answer."

The Persian nodded slowly. "I will aid you. But I think Hell-Gate opens before us, *effendi!*"

Simeon Gerard's interview with his attorney was short and conclusive. The man had at first been inclined to argue, but presently gave up the unequal struggle and took his leave, the vital signed documents in his brief-case. Ten minutes after he left, the doorbell rang, and Gerard answered it himself. He had dismissed the servants for the night.

It was his nephew, Steven, a tall, husky blond, who made a precarious living selling insurance and looked on his uncle with somewhat puzzled distaste. Beside him was a girl, slim and pretty, something curiously elfin in her small, heart-shaped face, about which auburn ringlets clustered.

Gerard said, "Come in, both of you." There was a little frown between his eyebrows, however, and Steven was quick to notice this.

"I—well, this is my fiancée, Jean Sloane," he said, rather ill at ease. "We were going out tonight, and I thought—we have tickets for a play, you see——"

Gerard acknowledged the introduction and led his guests into the great room where the fire, replenished, blazed up hotly. "Some sherry?" he suggested. "Solera—excellent stuff."

The boy and the girl sipped their drinks in silence. Gerard sat quietly, his eyes dwelling with a curiously gloating satisfaction on the strong young body of his nephew. Steven was young—good! He was healthy—even better!

"I have had bad news," Gerard said suddenly. "My physician tells me I will die in a month." He waved down the shocked expression of sympathy. "That does not trouble me. I have already engaged passage to the Orient. I wish to die there, and, since I shall not return from that voyage, I am taking steps to dispose of my property. I have turned it over to you, Steven—all of it."

Before the dumfounded young man could answer, Gerard turned to Jean Sloane. "I must apologize to you, for I am afraid I must spoil your evening. Naturally there is much I must discuss with Steven, and I have so little time——"

"Of course," the girl said hesitantly. "I *am* sorry, Mr. Gerard."

"Death comes to all," Gerard said sententiously, and thought to himself, "I'm playing the dying patriarch rather well." He went on, "I'll call a cab——"

Five minutes later the two men were alone. Gerard, eyeing his nephew sharply, stood up. "Come with me, Steven. There is something I must show you."

The boy followed his uncle along the hall, and into a luxuriously furnished bedroom. Gerard touched the wall, and a panel slid aside. "A private elevator, Steven. Come."

Staring, the other took his place beside the old man. He gave Gerard an inquiring glance as the elevator began to drop slowly.

"Er—what's downstairs?"

"My private workroom. See?"

Gerard opened the door. Steven took a step forward—and halted, aghast.

He looked upon the temple of the dark god Ahriman.

Dim and strange and very terrible it lay before him, a great room of black marble, cloudy with incense, dimly lit by flickering gleams of eery radiance. Priceless tapestries hung upon the walls; rugs of incredible beauty were underfoot, woven in Bokhara and Turkistan and the

far places of the world. A low ramp led up to a dais on which an altar lay like a crouching beast.

It was utterly silent.

Steven's voice was shocked as he said softly, "Good Lord—what *is* this?"

"I have told you. My workroom."

"What is this place?" the boy repeated.

Gerard looked at him sharply. Steven was standing rigid, swaying a little. The old man lifted his hand and moved it slowly toward the other's face. Steven did not stir or even blink.

"Do you hear me?" Gerard said loudly.

There was no answer. The boy stared before him, his eyes blank and expressionless.

A bent, dark figure shuffled into view. Dagh Zialet croaked, "You gave him the powder?"

"In the sherry. Yes."

"Good. All is ready." The Persian gripped Steven's hand and led the unresisting youth toward the altar. Gerard followed. He was trembling a little. He took a sharp knife from his pocket and laid it carefully on a brazier.

Steven lay motionless upon the altar. The Persian stood above him, taloned hands moving in strange, archaic gestures.

Gerard said hoarsely, "Be careful! He must not die! There must be no risk of an accusation of murder."

Dagh Zialet's face did not change; it wore an expression of rapt, almost ecstatic withdrawal. He pointed to the altar.

Gerard stretched himself at full length upon it.

From his position he could see the coiling mosaic designs on the low ceiling, flickering and retreating in the unsteady light. The smoke of incense slid up endlessly, endlessly. . . .

Dagh Zialet bared Gerard's breast. On the sallow skin a scarlet design was visible, a crescent-shaped brand he had borne since his first visit to Persia, when he had been marked for ever as a servant of Ahriman.

A knife in Dagh Zialet's hand brought a few drops of blood from the crimson sign.

The Persian reached for a chalice. He lifted it to Gerard's lips.

"Drink deep!"

The liquid was pungent and heady. The fumes mounted into Gerard's brain. He lay back as the Persian began a thin, high chanting, and stared up at the mosaic on the ceiling.

The incense thickened. Save for Dagh Zialet's voice, it was very still. A strange coldness began to pervade the air.

The temple seemed darker, now.

And the mosaics move . . . move . . . swayed and crept in the gloom, taking unearthly shapes before Gerard's drugged vision. A shadow grew slowly more distinct. . . .

The shadow of a great bird, hovering. . . .

Consciousness came back to Gerard slowly. For a time he lay motionless, desperately trying to fight down a racking sickness that nauseated him. Alternate waves of heat and frigid cold seemed to drive into his brain, in a never-ending monotony of pain. How long he lay thus he did not know; at last a warm, sweetish liquid trickled down his throat, and the agony subsided.

But it was nearly half an hour before he gathered his strength sufficiently to open his eyes and sit up. The light in the underground temple had faded, he thought, and the tripods of the braziers were shadows in the gloom. There was no sign of Dagh Ziaret.

Gerard slowly stood up, every muscle and joint aching. As though drawn by a magnet his gaze went to the altar from which he had arisen.

A man lay there—a withered, shrunken oldster, sunken eyelids closed, his clothing opened to bare a flaming scarlet mark on the sallow chest.

Simeon Gerard looked upon himself!

For a moment the overwhelming magnitude of the thing drained all emotion from him. He stood quite silent, looking down at the shriveled figure on the altar.

He had won! The Persian's sorcery had not failed. The mind and soul of Simeon Gerard dwelt now in the strong, youthful body of Steven.

He had cheated—death!

Gerard laughed exultantly. He stretched out his muscular arms and examined them; he ran shaking fingers across a face from which all the wrinkles had gone. He touched smooth, glossy hair—not the scanty, brittle crop he had formerly possessed.

A low laugh sounded. From the shadows came Dagh Ziaret, discolored teeth bared in a grin. The Persian cackled, “It is finished, *effendi*.”

Gerard nodded. He had a brief awkwardness in finding his voice, and, when he spoke, the tone was strange to him.

“It is finished. *Selah*. But what of—him?” He indicated the body on the altar.

“He, too, lives. Do you wish me to——”

“No,” Gerard said swiftly. “I have made my own arrangements.”

“Good. Now——” The Persian brought out a vial filled with crystalline white powder. “Take this. Once each six days dissolve a pinch of it in your wine. I shall give you more when this is used.” He came close, gripping Gerard's arm and peering up into the man's eyes. “Do not fail in this! For a year you must use this powder; then you will be safe. But if you stop before the year is up—it will not be well for you, *effendi*.”

Gerard placed the vial carefully in his pocket. “Is that all?”

“Almost. My—my reward?”

“Your fee was exorbitant.” Gerard hesitated, and then went on swiftly as he noticed the expression that sprang suddenly into the Persian's eyes. “But I shall pay it gladly. I must convert some securities into cash first, though. In a week——”

“As you wish,” Dagh Ziaret murmured. “I trust you. You will pay me.” He reached out a skinny hand and meaningly tapped the pocket containing the vial of white powder.

Gerard said nothing as the other turned and shuffled into the shadows. Presently the click of a lock told of the Persian's departure.

Then Gerard went back to the altar and carefully examined the man who lay upon it. He nodded in satisfaction. The stertorous breathing was becoming stronger.

One thing remained to do. There was a knife he had brought down here with him . . . here it was, on this brazier. It was razor-sharp. Gerard had chosen the weapon carefully.

Silently, a black shadow in the dimness, he turned and stalked back to the altar. A random gleam of light flickered on bright steel.

Dagh Ziaret had said that when Steven awoke his brain would be clouded, warped almost to madness by the shock of the psychic operation. Yet the Persian might be wrong. Steven might waken sane—and might talk.

Gerard bent low, his fingers tightening on the knife. He fumbled in the gloom, felt leathery skin and the cavity of an open, almost toothless mouth.

No—Steven must not be allowed to talk. He must never speak again. . . .

Seated before the great mirror in his bedroom, Simeon Gerard lit a cigarette and watched the image exhale smoke in luxurious puffs. A fine, strong, youthful image. No doubt it had never before smoked such expensive cigarettes, Gerard thought wryly. Indeed, he was doing this young body a great favor—initiating it to the delights of the epicure and the gourmet.

There was a keen, almost sensuous pleasure in watching the mirrored figure and comparing it, mentally, with the withered, diseased body he had worn before. As for Steven—well, no doubt he was already on the ship that would take him to the Orient, from which he would never return. The man who had taken Steven in charge had said nothing, though he had stared at the bloodstains around the mouth.

As Dagh Zialet had said, it was finished. A new life, literally, lay before Simeon Gerard.

Dagh Zialet—Gerard smiled a little ironically. The Persian really believed he would receive his fee. Well, that was his mistake. There was no hurry, however. For a few days Gerard planned to seclude himself in his home, getting accustomed to this strange new body. After that—

He could live again—live, indeed, unhampered by ruined and pain-racked flesh. Once more he could indulge in the strange delights he had learned, often too late to make use of them. He would go back to India, Persia, Egypt—but not yet! First a few years in Paris, Nice, the Riviera, and then to the Orient, with no danger of meeting Steven. Even a few months' grace would be enough. Steven, in the dying body he had acquired, could not live that long.

An annunciator rang. Gerard touched a button. The voice of one of his servants said, "Miss Sloane is on the telephone."

Miss Sloane? Who?—then Gerard remembered. Steven's fiancée. This was an unexpected development.

"I'll take the call," he said, and reached for the telephone.

"Hello?"

The girl's voice said, "Oh, is this you, Steve? I was worried when you didn't call."

Gerard frowned. He must play this part perfectly. Luckily, he was an excellent actor.

"Sorry, Jean," he said. "My uncle packed up and went off last night. Left me in charge of the house. I'd intended to phone you, but I just didn't get around to it."

"He's gone?" The girl seemed astonished. "That's strange."

"Not really. He explained it all to me—but I'll tell you all about it tonight. Suppose you meet me"—Gerard thought for a moment, and then named a quiet, good restaurant in the vicinity—"about eight?"

"Yes . . . all right, Steve. I'll see you then."

Gerard replaced the receiver. His eyebrows quirked up sardonically. This might not be so awkward after all.

"No doubt Steven has already proposed to her," he thought. "Well—I shall not back out of the bargain, then." It would be intriguing to explore the scented labyrinth of evil once more, to marry the girl, take her to Europe and the Orient, and to initiate her into the dark lore. . . .

A week passed. All had gone smoothly. Jean Sloane had suspected nothing; Gerard had played his part well. He had not allowed himself to see the girl often, pleading pressure of

work. One unexpected bit of good news had arrived. The ship on which Steven was a passenger had gone down in a storm on the China Sea, and he was not among the survivors, according to newspaper reports. Curiously enough, on the night the boat sank Gerard had had a vague but impressive dream of which, on awakening, he could only recall that it was somehow connected with a turmoil of wind and waves.

On the sixth day of his new life Gerard dissolved a pinch of the white powder in Amontillado and drank the wine slowly, noticing that the taste and bouquet were improved rather than harmed. He noted, too, that the vial held but little of the powder, and decided to call on Dagh Ziaret.

The Persian moved with alacrity as he led Gerard to the underground laboratory. He shuffled about hurriedly, lighting the oil lamps, coughing occasionally in the thick air.

Then he came to stand across the table from Gerard, his swarthy face alight with anticipation.

“You have the money?”

“Of course.” Gerard took a bulky envelope from his pocket and held it carelessly as he went on. “I’ve broken the vial you gave me, Dagh Ziaret. The powder’s gone, I’m afraid. You’d better give me some more.”

The Persian caught his breath. “You took some yesterday? Eh?” Stark fear showed in the man’s eyes.

“Yes. But in five days—well!” Gerard shrugged.

Muttering, Dagh Ziaret moved to a shelf and lifted down a large glass jar filled with the crystalline powder. Gerard’s lips twitched. More than a year’s supply there!

Carefully the Persian measured a small amount from the jar. Gerard came to stand behind him. His hand was hidden inside his coat.

Dagh Ziaret started to whirl, as though warned by some strange instinct. But he was too late. Gerard struck.

The knife entered cleanly between the ribs. There was little blood. The Persian coughed chokingly, tried to speak, and then slid down bonelessly to the floor. His nails ripped at the blackened planks.

Then he lay motionless.

Gerard, about to recover the knife, paused as a footstep sounded hollowly from above. A customer was in the Persian’s shop. With a little start Gerard remembered that Dagh Ziaret had failed to lock the metal door.

He glanced down at the Persian, stirred the man’s body with his foot. There was no response. Frowning, Gerard carefully slipped through the door and tiptoed up the narrow stairway till he could command a view of the shop.

A woman was there, fat and overdressed, holding a vase in her pudgy hands. She looked around impatiently, rapped on a table. Gerard whispered a silent curse. Then he froze as the customer, with an angry shrug, marched heavily toward him.

Before she had a chance to reach the door Gerard opened it and stepped out. “Can I help you, madame?” he asked.

“Why don’t you pay attention to your business?” the woman snapped. “I’ve been here for half an hour!”

Gerard repressed an impulse to call her a liar. He apologized instead. “Do you wish to buy this vase?”

“How much is it?”

“Er—ten dollars.” It was worth much more, but Gerard’s only wish was to get rid of the woman. His ruse succeeded, for she fumbled in her purse, found a bill, and thrust it at him, with a card.

“Send it to this address.”

Gerard held the vase till the woman’s footsteps died on the pavement outside. Then, dropping it on a table, he whirled and raced down the stairway. The metal door was closed.

He gave it an impatient push, but it did not yield. Frowning, Gerard tried to move the latch, with no result. He hesitated, struck by a sudden inexplicable fear, listening.

A faint crackling and roaring came to his ears. Gerard suddenly lunged forward, bracing his shoulder against the door, straining until veins bulged on his forehead.

Useless! He tried the latch again, rattling it in its socket. And, abruptly, the door moved and swung open under his hand.

Simultaneously a blast of raving, searing flame poured out through the portal. Gerard leaped back, his eyes distended. Through the doorway he saw that the underground room was ablaze. It was already a furnace, and fire poured out hungrily from the mouths of several great jars that lay overturned on the floor. Beyond the threshold was the body of Dagh Zialet, his face a cindery, blackened horror, one hand still gripping an overturned and broken lamp.

To attempt to enter the room would be madness and suicide. Gerard stood quite motionless until the spreading flames drove him back. Then, his lips gray, he ascended the stairs, walked through the shop, and let himself out into the street.

As he walked homeward he whispered, “I should have made sure he was dead . . . damn him! Damn him!”

Now Simeon Gerard entered the last phase of the affair. He had, of course, lied to Dagh Ziaret; the little vial of white powder had not been broken. But it contained a pitifully small amount of the priceless stuff.

Gerard gave a chemist a niggardly portion to be analyzed. He sent a dozen telegrams to men who might conceivably know what the powder contained. He pored over his immense library and pounced on every relevant reference—but there were all too few.

And, most of all, he wondered. What would happen when the supply of the drug failed?

He determined to find out. On the twelfth day after the experiment he left the vial unopened in his safe. There were no apparent ill-effects, save for an increasing drowsiness during an evening spent with Jean Sloane. He took her home early and was nearly asleep before the taxicab stopped at his door.

A short while later, clad in dressing-gown and pajamas, he stood hesitating before the safe. But at last he shrugged and went to his bedroom.

Almost immediately Gerard was asleep. He had an extraordinary dream, confused and distorted, in which he seemed first to be clinging to an overturned lifeboat, chilled by frigid waves that showered over him; and then he seemed to be in a dory, looking up at several unshaved faces that loomed above him. After that the dream became chaotic. There were visions of a ship—a tanker—on which he was apparently a passenger; there were sunlit far shores that slipped past and were gone; and at last Gerard saw in the distance the buildings of a city he recognized. It was Bushire, on the Persian Gulf.

No sooner had he realized this than he awoke, shivering and sweating. Moonlight fingered in wanly through the windows. The house was quite silent.

Gerard was still shuddering uncontrollably as he found his slippers and hurried to the safe. Not until he had swallowed a pinch of the white powder in a glass of wine did he dare to let his thoughts dwell on the dream.

Superficially there was nothing about the nightmare to terrify him. But all the while Gerard had been conscious of a certain indefinable familiarity—an *inward* familiarity—which filled him with genuine horror. In his dream, he realized, he had seemed to be back in his former body, ravaged and dying by years of evil. How he knew this he could not have said, but know it he did, unmistakably.

Sitting by a hurriedly-kindled fire, drawing great mouthfuls of smoke into his lungs, Gerard pondered. What, then, was the effect of the white powder? To prevent him from dreaming such things? Scarcely; there was more to it than that.

Why had Dagh Ziaret been so insistent that Gerard take the drug regularly for a year? Could it be that invisible psychic bonds were still striving to draw his mind and soul back to his former body?

Good God—*no!*

Gerard rose hastily, tossed his cigarette into the fire, and found a bottle of sleeping-tablets. Whether through the virtue of these or of the white powder, he had no more dreams that night and awoke refreshed and inclined to shrug away his previous fears.

But doubt still troubled him. He recalled the name of the tanker on which, in his dream, he had been a passenger—the *Yasmina*. And that morning he sent a cable to Bushire.

In due time the response came. The *Yasmina*, an oil tanker, had docked a few days before. In the log was a report that a castaway had been picked up in the China Sea—a half-paralyzed and imbecilic old man who was white-skinned, and whose tongue had been removed. In Bushire the man had wandered ashore and vanished; no trace of him had been found.

Gerard dared send no more cables. Obviously his former body, with the mind and soul of Steven within it, had survived the shipwreck—had been rescued by the seamen of the *Yasmina*.

Greatly worried, Gerard redoubled his effort to discover the nature of the mysterious drug. The chemists could give him no help; there were elements in the powder that defied analysis. Telegrams arrived, and they, too, were valueless. Some of Gerard's correspondents had heard of the drug, but none could give him the information he needed. Nor could he find any clues in his volumes on goety and in his *grimoires*.

Gerard sent more telegrams. Meanwhile he forced himself to live a normal sort of life; he spent considerable time with Jean, and began to frequent the night clubs. This, however, was only a passing phase, and it did not last long.

Swiftly the powder in the vial dwindled.

Gerard took smaller and smaller amounts, and increased the length of time between doses. The dreams began to recur, but he tried to forget them. There was one vision in which he seemed to be wandering through the streets of Bushire, and another in which he walked on and on through a wilderness of mountainous barrenness. And then there was a dream of Persian nomads who stared at the scarlet symbol on his breast, and placed him carefully in a litter and carried him north.

What was the real significance of the visions? If, as Gerard suspected, he temporarily returned to his former body, the mystery was only half solved. How could a dying old man survive a shipwreck and a mad journey into the arid Persian desert-lands?

There was one possible explanation; the youthful mind of Steven might have infused, through some strange psychic bond, additional vigor to the ravaged, diseased body. Dagh Zialet had said that Steven would be insane. And, truly, only a madman would have set out from Bushire into the heart of Persia.

As Gerard forced himself to take less and less of the drug, his dreams came with increasing frequency and vividness. The nomads were gone now, and he was in a hut in a little village that lay between tall mountains. An old man attended his wants, daily anointing the red brand of Ahriman with an oily, stinging substance. Once, when the Persian's robe gaped, Gerard saw a similar design on the bronzed flesh.

At first, in the dreams, Gerard seemed paralyzed. Later he gained some control of his body, and at this the Persian was pleased. Yet worn-out muscles often failed to respond, and the slightest movement brought on exhaustion.

Once Gerard tried to talk to his attendant, but only succeeded in making a hoarse croaking sound. Then he remembered how he had made certain Steven would never speak again. . . .

For several days now Gerard had not seen Jean. She rang the doorbell one night and brushed past him, her chin raised and determined. Gerard followed her to the library, where she sat down and looked at him intently.

"Steve," she began, "you're sick. I can tell that. If you won't call a doctor, I will."

Gerard was indeed ill. His eyes burned with fever brightness; his face was drawn and gray with exhaustion. For two days now the last of the powder had been gone, and he had been

dosing himself with caffeine and benzedrin in a frantic effort to keep awake.

He sat down, lighting a cigarette and taking short, nervous puffs. "Jean," he said slowly, "I can't explain. I don't want a doctor, though. . . ."

He had intended to say more, but despite himself Gerard's eyelids sank. The warmth of the room, the soft cushions of the chair, were deadly soporifics.

Suddenly conscious of his danger, he tried to rouse himself. But already it was a tremendous effort to open his eyes. His head lolled forward. . . .

Deep in his mind a frantic voice shrieked, "*Wake up!*" But it was too late.

Simeon Gerard slept.

Jean eyed the man for a moment. Then she stood up and gently eased Gerard back to a more comfortable position.

At the touch of her hands he moaned and stirred sleepily. His eyes opened. For a moment they stared, blank and blind; and then there was a soul behind them once more.

"Jean!" the man whispered. "I—what's happened? How did I get here?"

She drew back. "Steve—don't you know me?"

"Of course. But the last I remember Uncle Simeon took me down to a temple or something under the house, and—where is he?"

"Your uncle? He's been gone for months, Steve!"

Steven remembered nothing since he had entered the temple of Ahriman. Of his long weeks in the Orient, those torturing days of insanity, he knew nothing. During that period his mind had been gone. But now it had returned. . . .

"Amnesia," he said at last. "It must have been that."

Simeon Gerard awoke. He lay looking up at an illimitable blue expanse, dazed and frightened. Once more the frightful dream had him in its toils. But it was different now. He was no longer within the squalid little hut. . . .

No, he had not been there during the last dream, either. There had been a long chanting procession through the night, while torches flamed in the cold wind that blew down from the snow-topped mountains . . . a procession in which he had been borne in an open litter. The Persians had taken him toward the high tower beyond the village, had begun to climb a ramp of steps that wound about it . . . and had left him there, staring up at the stars. Then he had awakened.

A chanting procession . . . and a tower in Persia . . . and a man who lay motionless upon its summit. These meant something vitally important, Gerard felt. The old Persian had led the villagers, and his deep voice had rolled out in sonorous syllables. He had intoned—

The Call of Ahriman! The Prayer for the Dead!

But that was madness. He wasn't dead. He could still think and feel. . . .

But could he?

Now Gerard realized that he seemed to have no feeling whatever in his body. Nor could he move or even close his eyes. He lay outstretched, stiff and immobile, staring up. Suppose Steven had died here in Persia. Could the soul of Simeon Gerard be drawn back to a corpse?

No, he wasn't dead. He couldn't be. Yet, straining and trying frantically to move even a muscle, Gerard realized that he was completely paralyzed. His body seemed to be without feeling.

A shadow moved against the blue. A bird was circling, far above. It dropped lower.

And other shadows came, till there were dozens of the things circling, circling . . . and Gerard remembered the hovering, indistinct outline he had seen on the roof of the temple of Ahriman, as well as the vision Dagh Ziafet had seen in his crystal. What had the Persian said?

I see birds circling . . . great birds that swoop against the sky. . . .

The shadows dropped toward the tower.

There are vultures in the crystal, effendi!

A frightful shock of cold horror flamed through Gerard. With a grinding, fearful effort he succeeded in turning his head very slightly; the strain left him drained of all vitality and utterly helpless.

And now he saw the summit of the tower around him.

Four skeletons lay near-by, fleshless, white, grinning up in grim mockery. Quite suddenly Gerard realized the truth.

This was the Tower of Silence . . . one of the towers on which the Persians, according to their religion, exposed their dead. Since fire and earth were too sacred to be contaminated with human flesh, corpses were left upon the Towers of Death, to the sun and the wind and—the vultures!

The birds came down swiftly, sensing helpless prey. There was a flapping of great wings; a vulture swept above Gerard, and the man, half insane with horror, thought: *Thank God, I can feel nothing now!* Where before he had shrunk from the thought that his soul might be inhabiting a corpse, he now welcomed the idea gladly.

Silence, and a cold wind blowing from the snow-topped mountains of Persia.

Silence, save for the beat of great wings. The birds were all around him now. A naked, scabrous neck and a vicious beak came into Gerard's range of vision. . . .

Quite suddenly the vultures dropped, their outspread wings almost hiding the man's body. Gerard saw a swift beak striking down. . . .

He had been wrong. He could still feel pain.

[The end of *Towers of Death* by Henry Kuttner]