

Chambers Robert William

The Slayer of Souls



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Chambers Robert W. Robert William

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I

Mirror of Fashion,
Admiral of Finance,
Don't, in a passion,
Denounce this poor Romance;
For, while I dare not hope it might
Enthuse you,
Perhaps it will, some rainy night,
Amuse you.

II

So, your attention,
In poetry polite,
To my invention
I bashfully invite.
Don't hurl the book at Eddie's head
Deep laden,
Or Messmore's; you might hit instead
Will Braden.

III

Kahn among Cannors,
And Grand Vizier of style,
Emir of Manners,
Accept – and place on file —
This tribute, which I proffer while
I grovel,
And honor with thy matchless Smile
My novel.

R. W. C.

CHAPTER I

THE YEZIDEE

Only when the *Nan-yang Maru* sailed from Yuen-San did her terrible sense of foreboding begin to subside.

For four years, waking or sleeping, the awful subconsciousness of supreme evil had never left her.

But now, as the Korean shore, receding into darkness, grew dimmer and dimmer, fear subsided and grew vague as the half-forgotten memory of horror in a dream.

She stood near the steamer's stern apart from other passengers, a slender, lonely figure in her silver-fox furs, her ulster and smart little hat, watching the lights of Yuen-San grow paler and smaller along the horizon until they looked like a level row of stars.

Under her haunted eyes Asia was slowly dissolving to a streak of vapour in the misty lustre of the moon.

Suddenly the ancient continent disappeared, washed out by a wave against the sky; and with it vanished the last shreds of that accursed nightmare which had possessed her for four endless years. But whether during those unreal years her soul had only been held in bondage, or whether, as she had been taught, it had been irrevocably destroyed, she still remained uncertain, knowing nothing about the death of souls or how it was accomplished.

As she stood there, her sad eyes fixed on the misty East, a passenger passing – an Englishwoman – paused to say something kind to the young American; and added, "if there is anything my husband and I can do it would give us much pleasure." The girl had turned her head as though not comprehending. The other woman hesitated.

"This is Doctor Norne's daughter, is it not?" she inquired in a pleasant voice.

"Yes, I am Tressa Norne... I ask your pardon... Thank you, madam: – I am – I seem to be – a trifle dazed – "

"What wonder, you poor child! Come to us if you feel need of companionship."

"You are very kind... I seem to wish to be alone, somehow."

"I understand... Good-night, my dear."

Late the next morning Tressa Norne awoke, conscious for the first time in four years that it was at last her own familiar self stretched out there on the pillows where sunshine streamed through the porthole. All that day she lay in her bamboo steamer chair on deck. Sun and wind conspired to dry every tear that wet her closed lashes. Her dark, glossy hair blew about her face; scarlet tinted her full lips again; the tense hands relaxed. Peace came at sundown.

That evening she took her Yu-kin from her cabin and found a chair on the deserted hurricane deck.

And here, in the brilliant moonlight of the China Sea, she curled up cross-legged on the deck, all alone, and sounded the four futile strings of her moon-lute, and hummed to herself, in a still voice, old songs she had sung in Yian before the tragedy. She sang the tent-song called *Tchinguiz*. She sang *Camel Bells* and *The Blue Bazaar*, – children's songs of the Yiort. She sang the ancient Khiounnou song called "The Saghalien":

I

In the month of Saffar
Among the river-reeds

I saw two horsemen
Sitting on their steeds.
Tulugum!
Heitulum!
By the river-reeds

II

In the month of Saffar
A demon guards the ford.
Tokhta, my Lover!
Draw your shining sword!
Tulugum!
Heitulum!
Slay him with your sword!

III

In the month of Saffar
Among the water-weeds
I saw two horsemen
Fighting on their steeds.
Tulugum!
Heitulum!
How my lover bleeds!

IV

In the month of Saffar,
The Year I should have wed —
The Year of The Panther —
My lover lay dead, —
Tulugum!
Heitulum!
Dead without a head.

And songs like these – the one called "Keuke Mongol," and an ancient air of the Tchortchas called "The Thirty Thousand Calamities," and some Chinese boatmen's songs which she had heard in Yian before the tragedy; these she hummed to herself there in the moonlight playing on her round-faced, short-necked lute of four strings.

Terror indeed seemed ended for her, and in her heart a great overwhelming joy was welling up which seemed to overflow across the entire moonlit world.

She had no longer any fear; no premonition of further evil. Among the few Americans and English aboard, something of her story was already known. People were kind; and they were also considerate enough to subdue their sympathetic curiosity when they discovered that this young American girl shrank from any mention of what had happened to her during the last four years of the Great World War.

It was evident, also, that she preferred to remain aloof; and this inclination, when finally understood, was respected by her fellow passengers. The clever, efficient and polite Japanese officers and crew of the *Nan-yang Maru* were invariably considerate and courteous to her, and they remained nicely reticent, although they also knew the main outline of her story and very much desired to know more. And so, surrounded now by the friendly security of civilised humanity, Tressa Norne, reborn to light out of hell's own shadows, awoke from four years of nightmare which, after all, perhaps, never had seemed entirely actual.

And now God's real sun warmed her by day; His real moon bathed her in creamy coolness by night; sky and wind and wave thrilled her with their blessed assurance that this was once more the real world which stretched illimitably on every side from horizon to horizon; and the fair faces and pleasant voices of her own countrymen made the past seem only a ghastly dream that never again could enmesh her soul with its web of sorcery.

And now the days at sea fled very swiftly; and when at last the Golden Gate was not far away she had finally managed to persuade herself that nothing really can harm the human soul; that the monstrous devil-years were ended, never again to return; that in this vast, clean Western Continent there could be no occult threat to dread, no gigantic menace to destroy her body, no secret power that could consign her soul to the dreadful abysm of spiritual annihilation.

Very early that morning she came on deck. The November day was delightfully warm, the air clear save for a belt of mist low on the water to the southward.

She had been told that land would not be sighted for twenty-four hours, but she went forward and stood beside the starboard rail, searching the horizon with the enchanted eyes of hope.

As she stood there a Japanese ship's officer crossing the deck, forward, halted abruptly and stood staring at something to the southward.

At the same moment, above the belt of mist on the water, and perfectly clear against the blue sky above, the girl saw a fountain of gold fire rise from the fog, drift upward in the daylight, slowly assume the incandescent outline of a serpentine creature which leisurely uncoiled and hung there floating, its lizard-tail undulating, its feet with their five stumpy claws closing, relaxing, like those of a living reptile. For a full minute this amazing shape of fire floated there in the sky, brilliant in the morning light, then the reptilian form faded, died out, and the last spark vanished in the sunshine.

When the Japanese officer at last turned to resume his promenade, he noticed a white-faced girl gripping a stanchion behind him as though she were on the point of swooning. He crossed the deck quickly. Tressa Norne's eyes opened.

"Are you ill, Miss Norne?" he asked.

"The – the Dragon," she whispered.

The officer laughed. "Why, that was nothing but Chinese day-fireworks," he explained. "The crew of some fishing boat yonder in the fog is amusing itself." He looked at her narrowly, then with a nice little bow and smile he offered his arm: "If you are indisposed, perhaps you might wish to go below to your stateroom, Miss Norne?"

She thanked him, managed to pull herself together and force a ghost of a smile.

He lingered a moment, said something cheerful about being nearly home, then made her a punctilious salute and went his way.

Tressa Norne leaned back against the stanchion and closed her eyes. Her pallor became deathly. She bent over and laid her white face in her folded arms.

After a while she lifted her head, and, turning very slowly, stared at the fog-belt out of frightened eyes.

And saw, rising out of the fog, a pearl-tinted sphere which gradually mounted into the clear daylight above like the full moon's phantom in the sky.

Higher, higher rose the spectral moon until at last it swam in the very zenith. Then it slowly evaporated in the blue vault above.

A great wave of despair swept her; she clung to the stanchion, staring with half-blinded eyes at the flat fog-bank in the south.

But no more "Chinese day-fireworks" rose out of it. And at length she summoned sufficient strength to go below to her cabin and lie there, half senseless, huddled on her bed.

When land was sighted, the following morning, Tressa Norne had lived a century in twenty-four hours. And in that space of time her agonised soul had touched all depths.

But now as the Golden Gate loomed up in the morning light, rage, terror, despair had burned themselves out. From their ashes within her mind arose the cool wrath of desperation armed for anything, wary, alert, passionately determined to survive at whatever cost, recklessly ready to fight for bodily existence.

That was her sole instinct now, to go on living, to survive, no matter at what price. And if it were indeed true that her soul had been slain, she defied its murderers to slay her body also.

That night, at her hotel in San Francisco, she double-locked her door and lay down without undressing, leaving all lights burning and an automatic pistol underneath her pillow.

Toward morning she fell asleep, slept for an hour, started up in awful fear. And saw the double-locked door opposite the foot of her bed slowly opening of its own accord.

Into the brightly illuminated room stepped a graceful young man in full evening dress carrying over his left arm an overcoat, and in his other hand a top hat and silver tipped walking-stick.

With one bound the girl swung herself from the bed to the carpet and clutched at the pistol under her pillow.

"Sanang!" she cried in a terrible voice.

"Keuke Mongol!" he said, smilingly.

For a moment they confronted each other in the brightly lighted bedroom, then, partly turning, he cast a calm glance at the open door behind him; and, as though moved by a wind, the door slowly closed. And she heard the key turn of itself in the lock, and saw the bolt slide smoothly into place again.

Her power of speech came back to her presently – only a broken whisper at first: "Do you think I am afraid of your accursed magic?" she managed to gasp. "Do you think I am afraid of you, Sanang?"

"You are afraid," he said serenely.

"You lie!"

"No, I do not lie. To one another the Yezidees never lie."

"You lie again, assassin! I am no Yezidee!"

He smiled gently. His features were pleasing, smooth, and regular; his cheek-bones high, his skin fine and of a pale and delicate ivory colour. Once his black, beautifully shaped eyes wandered to the levelled pistol which she now held clutched desperately close to her right hip, and a slightly ironical expression veiled his gaze for an instant.

"Bullets?" he murmured. "But you and I are of the Hassanis."

"The third lie, Sanang!" Her voice had regained its strength. Tense, alert, blue eyes ablaze, every faculty concentrated on the terrible business before her, the girl now seemed like some supple leopardess poised on the swift verge of murder.

"Tokhta!"¹ She spat the word. "Any movement toward a hidden weapon, any gesture suggesting recourse to magic – and I kill you, Sanang, exactly where you stand!"

"With a pistol?" He laughed. Then his smooth features altered subtly. He said: "Keuke Mongol, who call yourself Tressa Norne, – Keuke – heavenly azure-blue, – named so in the temple because of the colour of your eyes – listen attentively, for this is the Yarlig which I bring to you by word of mouth from Yian, as from Yezidee to Yezidee:

"Here, in this land called the United States of America, the Temple girl, Keuke Mongol, who has witnessed the mysteries of Erlik and who understands the magic of the Sheiks-el-Djebel, and who has seen Mount Alamout and the eight castles and the fifty thousand Hassanis in white turbans and in robes of white; —*you*– Azure-blue eyes – heed the Yarlig! – or may thirty thousand calamities overtake you!"

There was a dead silence; then he went on seriously: "It is decreed: You shall cease to remember that you are a Yezidee, that you are of the Hassanis, that you ever have laid eyes on Yian the Beautiful, that you ever set naked foot upon Mount Alamout. It is decreed that you remember nothing of what you have seen and heard, of what has been told and taught during the last four years reckoned as the Christians reckon from our Year of the Bull. Otherwise – my Master sends you this for your —*convenience*."

Leisurely, from under his folded overcoat, the young man produced a roll of white cloth and dropped it at her feet and the girl shrank aside, shuddering, knowing that the roll of white cloth was meant for her winding-sheet.

Then the colour came back to lip and cheek; and, glancing up from the soft white shroud, she smiled at the young man: "Have you ended your Oriental mummery?" she asked calmly. "Listen very seriously in your turn, Sanang, Sheik-el-Djebel, Prince of the Hassanis who, God knows when and how, have come out into the sunshine of this clean and decent country, out of a filthy darkness where devils and sorcerers make earth a hell.

"If you, or yours, threaten me, annoy me, interfere with me, I shall go to our civilised police and tell all I know concerning the Yezidees. I mean to live. Do you understand? You know what you have done to me and mine. I come back to my own country alone, without any living kin, poor, homeless, friendless, – and, perhaps, damned. I intend, nevertheless, to survive. I shall not relax my clutch on bodily existence whatever the Yezidees may pretend to have done to my soul. I am determined to live in the body, anyway."

He nodded gravely.

She said: "Out at sea, over the fog, I saw the sign of Yu-lao in fire floating in the day-sky. I saw his spectral moon rise and vanish in mid-heaven. I understood. But – " And here she suddenly showed an edge of teeth under the full scarlet upper lip: "Keep your signs and your shrouds to yourself, dog of a Yezidee! – toad! – tortoise-egg! – he-goat with three legs! Keep your threats and your messages to yourself! Keep your accursed magic to yourself! Do you think to frighten me with your sorcery by showing me the Moons of Yu-lao? – by opening a bolted door? I know more of such magic than do you, Sanang – Death Adder of Alamout!"

Suddenly she laughed aloud at him – laughed insultingly in his expressionless face:

"I saw you and Gutchlug Khan and your cowardly Tchortchas in red-lacquered jackets slink out of the Temple of Erlik where the bronze gong thundered and a cloud settled down raining little yellow snakes all over the marble steps – all over you, Prince Sanang! You were *afraid*, my Toughtchi! – you and Gutchlug and your red Tchortchas with their halberds all dripping with human entrails! And I saw you mount and gallop off into the woods while in the depths of the magic cloud which rained little yellow snakes all around you, we temple girls laughed and mocked at you – at you and your cowardly Tchortcha horsemen."

¹ "Look out!" Nomad-Mongol dialect.

A slight tinge of pink came into the young man's pale face. Tressa Norne stepped nearer, her levelled pistol resting on her hip.

"Why did you not complain of us to your Master, the Old Man of the Mountain?" she asked jeeringly. "And where, also, was your Yezidee magic when it rained little snakes? – What frightened you away – who had boldly come to seize a temple girl – you who had screwed up your courage sufficiently to defy Erlik in his very shrine and snatch from his temple a young thing whose naked body wrapped in gold was worth the chance of death to you?"

The young man's top-hat dropped to the floor. He bent over to pick it up. His face was quite expressionless, quite colourless, now.

"I went on no such errand," he said with an effort. "I went with a thousand prayers on scarlet paper made in –"

"A lie, Yezidee! You came to seize *me*!"

He turned still paler. "By Abu, Omar, Otman, and Ali, it is not true!"

"You lie! – by the Lion of God, Hassini!"

She stepped closer. "And I'll tell you another thing you fear – you Yezidee of Alamout – you robber of Yian – you sorcerer of Sabbah Khan, and chief of his sect of Assassins! You fear this native land of mine, America; and its laws and customs, and its clear, clean sunshine; and its cities and people; and its police! Take that message back. We Americans fear nobody save the true God! – nobody – neither Yezidee nor Hassani nor Russ nor German nor that sexless monster born of hell and called the Bolshevik!"

"Tokhta!" he cried sharply.

"Damn you!" retorted the girl; "get out of my room! Get out of my sight! Get out of my path! Get out of my life! Take that to your Master of Mount Alamout! I do what I please; I go where I please; I live as I please. And if I please, *I turn against him*!"

"In that event," he said hoarsely, "there lies your winding-sheet on the floor at your feet! Take up your shroud; and make Erlik seize you!"

"Sanang," she said very seriously.

"I hear you, Keuke-Mongol."

"Listen attentively. I wish to live. I have had enough of death in life. I desire to remain a living, breathing thing – even if it be true – as you Yezidees tell me, that you have caught my soul in a net and that your sorcerers really control its destiny.

"But damned or not, I passionately desire to live. And I am coward enough to hold my peace for the sake of living. So – I remain silent. I have no stomach to defy the Yezidees; because, if I do, sooner or later I shall be killed. I know it. I have no desire to die for others – to perish for the sake of the common good. I am young. I have suffered too much; I am determined to live – and let my soul take its chances between God and Erlik."

She came close to him, looked curiously into his pale face.

"I laughed at you out of the temple cloud," she said. "I know how to open bolted doors as well as you do. And I know *other things*. And if you ever again come to me in this life I shall first torture you, then slay you. Then I shall tell all!.. and unroll my shroud."

"I keep your word of promise until you break it," he interrupted hastily. "Yarlig! It is decreed!" And then he slowly turned as though to glance over his shoulder at the locked and bolted door.

"Permit me to open it for you, Prince Sanang," said the girl scornfully. And she gazed steadily at the door.

Presently, all by itself, the key turned in the lock, the bolt slid back, the door gently opened.

Toward it, white as a corpse, his overcoat on his left arm, his stick and top-hat in the other hand, crept the young man in his faultless evening garb.

Then, as he reached the threshold, he suddenly sprang aside. A small yellow snake lay coiled there on the door sill. For a full throbbing minute the young man stared at the yellow reptile in

unfeigned horror. Then, very cautiously, he moved his fascinated eyes sideways and gazed in silence at Tressa Norne.

The girl laughed.

"Sorceress!" he burst out hoarsely. "Take that accursed thing from my path!"

"What thing, Sanang?" At that his dark, frightened eyes stole toward the threshold again, seeking the little snake. But there was no snake there. And when he was certain of this he went, twitching and trembling all over.

Behind him the door closed softly, locking and bolting itself.

And behind the bolted door in the brightly lighted bedroom Tressa Norne fell on both knees, her pistol still clutched in her right hand, calling passionately upon Christ to forgive her for the dreadful ability she had dared to use, and begging Him to save her body from death and her soul from the snare of the Yezidee.

CHAPTER II

THE YELLOW SNAKE

When the young man named Sanang left the bed-chamber of Tressa Norne he turned to the right in the carpeted corridor outside and hurried toward the hotel elevator. But he did not ring for the lift; instead he took the spiral iron stairway which circled it, and mounted hastily to the floor above.

Here was his own apartment and he entered it with a key bearing the hotel tag. A dusky-skinned powerful old man wearing a grizzled beard and a greasy broadcloth coat of old-fashioned cut known to provincials as a "Prince Albert" looked up from where he was seated cross-legged upon the sofa, sharpening a curved knife on a whetstone.

"Gutchlug," stammered Sanang, "I am afraid of her! What happened two years ago at the temple happened again a moment since, there in her very bedroom! She made a yellow death-adder out of nothing and placed it upon the threshold, and mocked me with laughter. May Thirty Thousand Calamities overtake her! May Erlik seize her! May her eyes rot out and her limbs fester! May the seven score and three principal devils – "

"You chatter like a temple ape," said Gutchlug tranquilly. "Does Keuke Mongol die or live? That alone interests me."

"Gutchlug," faltered the young man, "thou knowest that m-my heart is inclined to mercy toward this young Yezidee – "

"I know that it is inclined to lust," said the other bluntly.

Sanang's pale face flamed.

"Listen," he said. "If I had not loved her better than life had I dared go that day to the temple to take her for my own?"

"You loved life better," said Gutchlug. "You fled when it rained snakes on the temple steps – you and your Tchortcha horsemen! Kai! I also ran. But I gave every soldier thirty blows with a stick before I slept that night. And you should have had your thirty, also, conforming to the Yarlig, my Toughtchi."

Sanang, still holding his hat and cane and carrying his overcoat over his left arm, looked down at the heavy, brutal features of Gutchlug Khan – at the cruel mouth with its crooked smile under the grizzled beard; at the huge hands – the powerful hands of a murderer – now deftly honing to a razor-edge the Kalmuck knife held so firmly yet lightly in his great blunt fingers.

"Listen attentively, Prince Sanang," growled Gutchlug, pausing in his monotonous task to test the blade's edge on his thumb – "Does the Yezidee Keuke Mongol live? Yes or no?"

Sanang hesitated, moistened his pallid lips. "She dares not betray us."

"By what pledge?"

"Fear."

"That is no pledge. You also were afraid, yet you went to the temple!"

"She has listened to the Yarlig. She has looked upon her shroud. She has admitted that she desires to live. Therein lies her pledge to us."

"And she placed a yellow snake at your feet!" sneered Gutchlug. "Prince Sanang, tell me, what man or what devil in all the chronicles of the past has ever tamed a Snow-Leopard?" And he continued to hone his yataghan.

"Gutchlug – "

"No, she dies," said the other tranquilly.

"Not yet!"

"When, then?"

"Gutchlug, thou knowest me. Hear my pledge! At her first gesture toward treachery – her first thought of betrayal – I myself will end it all."

"You promise to slay this young snow-leopardess?"

"By the four companions, I swear to kill her with my own hands!"

Gutchlug sneered. "Kill her – yes – with the kiss that has burned thy lips to ashes for all these months. I know thee, Sanang. Leave her to me. Dead she will no longer trouble thee."

"Gutchlug!"

"I hear, Prince Sanang."

"Strike when I nod. Not until then."

"I hear, Toughtchi. I understand thee, my Banneret. I whet my knife. Kai!"

Sanang looked at him, put on his top-hat and overcoat, pulled on a pair of white evening gloves.

"I go forth," he said more pleasantly.

"I remain here to talk to my seven ancestors and sharpen my knife," remarked Gutchlug.

"When the white world and the yellow world and the brown world and the black world finally fall before the Hassanis," said Sanang with a quick smile, "I shall bring thee to her. Gutchlug – once – before she is veiled, thou shalt behold what is lovelier than Eve."

The other stolidly whetted his knife.

Sanang pulled out a gold cigarette case, lighted a cigarette with an air.

"I go among Germans," he volunteered amiably. "The huns swam across two oceans, but, like the unclean swine, it is their own throats they cut when they swim! Well, there is only one God. And not very many angels. Erlik is greater. And there are many million devils to do his bidding. Adieu. There is rice and there is koumiss in the frozen closet. When I return you shall have been asleep for hours."

When Sanang left the hotel one of two young men seated in the hotel lobby got up and strolled out after him.

A few minutes later the other man went to the elevator, ascended to the fourth floor, and entered an apartment next to the one occupied by Sanang.

There was another man there, lying on the lounge and smoking a cigar. Without a word, they both went leisurely about the matter of disrobing for the night.

When the shorter man who had been in the apartment when the other entered, and who was dark and curly-headed, had attired himself in pyjamas, he sat down on one of the twin beds to enjoy his cigar to the bitter end.

"Has Sanang gone out?" he inquired in a low voice.

"Yes. Benton went after him."

The other man nodded. "Cleves," he said, "I guess it looks as though this Norne girl is in it, too."

"What happened?"

"As soon as she arrived, Sanang made straight for her apartment. He remained inside for half an hour. Then he came out in a hurry and went to his own rooms, where that surly servant of his squats all day, shining up his arsenal, and drinking koumiss."

"Did you get their conversation?"

"I've got a record of the gibberish. It requires an interpreter, of course."

"I suppose so. I'll take the records east with me to-morrow, and by the same token I'd better notify New York that I'm leaving."

He went, half-undressed, to the telephone, got the telegraph office, and sent the following message:

"Recklow, *New York*:

"Leaving to-morrow for N. Y. with samples. Retain expert in Oriental fabrics.

"Victor Cleves."

"Report for me, too," said the dark young man, who was still enjoying his cigar on his pillows. So Cleves sent another telegram, directed also to

"Recklow, *New York*:

"Benton and I are watching the market. Chinese importations fluctuate. Recent consignment per *Nan-yang Maru* will be carefully inspected and details forwarded.

"Alek Selden."

In the next room Gutchlug could hear the voice of Cleves at the telephone, but he merely shrugged his heavy shoulders in contempt. For he had other things to do beside eavesdropping.

Also, for the last hour – in fact, ever since Sanang's departure – something had been happening to him – something that happens to a Hassani only once in a lifetime. And now this unique thing had happened to him – to him, Gutchlug Khan – to him before whose Khiounnou ancestors eighty-one thousand nations had bowed the knee.

It had come to him at last, this dread thing, unheralded, totally unexpected, a few minutes after Sanang had departed.

And he suddenly knew he was going to die.

And, when, presently, he comprehended it, he bent his grizzled head and listened seriously. And, after a little silence, he heard his soul bidding him farewell.

So the chatter of white men at a telephone in the next apartment had no longer any significance for him. Whether or not they had been spying on him; whether they were plotting, made no difference to him now.

He tested his knife's edge with his thumb and listened gravely to his soul bidding him farewell.

But, for a Yezidee, there was still a little detail to attend to before his soul departed; – two matters to regulate. One was to select his shroud. The other was to cut the white throat of this young snow-leopardess called Keuke Mongol, the Yezidee temple girl.

And he could steal down to her bedroom and finish that matter in five minutes.

But first he must choose his shroud, as is the custom of the Yezidee.

That office, however, was quickly accomplished in a country where fine white sheets of linen are to be found on every hotel bed.

So, on his way to the door, his naked knife in his right hand, he paused to fumble under the bed-covers and draw out a white linen sheet.

Something hurt his hand like a needle. He moved it, felt the thing squirm under his fingers and pierce his palm again and again. With a shriek, he tore the bedclothes from the bed.

A little yellow snake lay coiled there.

He got as far as the telephone, but could not use it. And there he fell heavily, shaking the room and dragging the instrument down with him.

There was some excitement. Cleves and Selden in their bathrobes went in to look at the body. The hotel physician diagnosed it as heart-trouble. Or, possibly, poison. Some gazed significantly at the naked knife still clutched in the dead man's hands.

Around the wrist of the other hand was twisted a pliable gold bracelet representing a little snake. It had real emeralds for eyes.

It had not been there when Gutchlug died.

But nobody except Sanang could know that. And later when Sanang came back and found Gutchlug very dead on the bed and a policeman sitting outside, he offered no information concerning the new bracelet shaped like a snake with real emeralds for eyes, which adorned the dead man's left wrist.

Toward evening, however, after an autopsy had confirmed the house physician's diagnosis that heart-disease had finished Gutchlug, Sanang mustered enough courage to go to the desk in the lobby and send up his card to Miss Norne.

It appeared, however, that Miss Norne had left for Chicago about noon.

CHAPTER III

GREY MAGIC

To Victor Cleves came the following telegram in code:

"Washington

"April 14th, 1919."

"Investigation ordered by the State Department as the result of frequent mention in despatches of Chinese troops operating with the Russian Bolsheviki forces has disclosed that the Bolsheviki are actually raising a Chinese division of 30,000 men recruited in Central Asia. This division has been guilty of the greatest cruelties. A strange rumour prevails among the Allied forces at Archangel that this Chinese division is led by Yezidee and Hassani officers belonging to the sect of devil-worshippers and that they employ black arts and magic in battle.

"From information so far gathered by the several branches of the United States Secret Service operating throughout the world, it appears possible that the various revolutionary forces of disorder, in Europe and Asia, which now are violently threatening the peace and security, of all established civilisation on earth, may have had a common origin. This origin, it is now suspected, may date back to a very remote epoch; the wide-spread forces of violence and merciless destruction may have had their beginning among some ancient and predatory race whose existence was maintained solely by robbery and murder.

"Anarchists, terrorists, Bolshevists, Reds of all shades and degrees, are now believed to represent in modern times what perhaps once was a tribe of Assassins – a sect whose religion was founded upon a common predilection for crimes of violence.

"On this theory then, for the present, the United States Government will proceed with this investigation of Bolshevism; and the Secret Service will continue to pay particular attention to all Orientals in the United States and other countries. You personally are formally instructed to keep in touch with XLY-371 (Alek Selden) and ZB-303 (James Benton), and to employ every possible means to become friendly with the girl Tressa Norne, win her confidence, and, if possible, enlist her actively in the Government Service as your particular aid and comrade.

"It is equally important that the movements of the Oriental, called Sanang, be carefully observed in order to discover the identity and whereabouts of his companions. However, until further instructions he is not to be taken into custody. M. H. 2479.

"(Signed)

"(John Recklow.)"

The long despatch from John Recklow made Cleves's duty plain enough.

For months, now, Selden and Benton had been watching Tressa Norne. And they had learned practically nothing about her.

And now the girl had come within Cleves's sphere of operation. She had been in New York for two weeks. Telegrams from Benton in Chicago, and from Selden in Buffalo, had prepared him for her arrival.

He had his men watching her boarding-house on West Twenty-eighth Street, men to follow her, men to keep their eyes on her at the theatre, where every evening, at 10:45, her *entr' acte* was staged. He knew where to get her. But he, himself, had been on the watch for the man Sanang; and had failed to find the slightest trace of him in New York, although warned that he had arrived.

So, for that evening, he left the hunt for Sanang to others, put on his evening clothes, and dined with fashionable friends at the Patroons' Club, who never for an instant suspected that young Victor Cleves was in the Service of the United States Government. About half-past nine he strolled around to the theatre, desiring to miss as much as possible of the popular show without being too late to see the curious little *entr' acte* in which this girl, Tressa Norne, appeared alone.

He had secured an aisle seat near the stage at an outrageous price; the main show was still thundering and fizzing and glittering as he entered the theatre; so he stood in the rear behind the orchestra until the descending curtain extinguished the outrageous glare and din.

Then he went down the aisle, and as he seated himself Tressa Norne stepped from the wings and stood before the lowered curtain facing an expectant but oddly undemonstrative audience.

The girl worked rapidly, seriously, and in silence. She seemed a mere child there behind the footlights, not more than sixteen anyway – her winsome eyes and wistful lips unspoiled by the world's wisdom.

Yet once or twice the mouth drooped for a second and the winning eyes darkened to a remoter blue – the brooding iris hue of far horizons.

She wore the characteristic tabard of stiff golden tissue and the gold pagoda-shaped headpiece of a Yezidee temple girl. Her flat, slipper-shaped foot-gear was of stiff gold, too, and curled upward at the toes.

All this accentuated her apparent youth. For in face and throat no firmer contours had as yet modified the soft fullness of immaturity; her limbs were boyish and frail, and her bosom more undecided still, so that the embroidered breadth of gold fell flat and straight from her chest to a few inches above the ankles.

She seemed to have no stock of paraphernalia with which to aid the performance; no assistant, no orchestral diversion, nor did she serve herself with any magician's patter. She did her work close to the footlights.

Behind her loomed a black curtain; the strip of stage in front was bare even of carpet; the orchestra remained mute.

But when she needed anything – a little table, for example – well, it was suddenly there where she required it – a tripod, for instance, evidently fitted to hold the big iridescent bubble of glass in which swarmed little tropical fishes – and which arrived neatly from nowhere. She merely placed her hands before her as though ready to support something weighty which she expected and – suddenly, the huge crystal bubble was visible, resting between her hands. And when she tired of holding it, she set it upon the empty air and let go of it; and instead of crashing to the stage with its finny rainbow swarm of swimmers, out of thin air appeared a tripod to support it.

Applause followed, not very enthusiastic, for the sort of audience which sustains the shows of which her performance was merely an *entr' acte* is an audience responsive only to the obvious.

Nobody ever before had seen that sort of magic in America. People scarcely knew whether or not they quite liked it. The lightning of innovation stupefies the dull; ignorance is always suspicious of innovation – always afraid to put itself on record until its mind is made up by somebody else.

So in this typical New York audience approbation was cautious, but every fascinated eye remained focused on this young girl who continued to do incredible things, which seemed to resemble "putting something over" on them; a thing which no uneducated American conglomeration ever quite forgives.

The girl's silence, too, perplexed them; they were accustomed to gabble, to noise, to jazz, vocal and instrumental, to that incessant metropolitan clamour which fills every second with sound in a city whose only distinction is its din. Stage, press, art, letters, social existence unless noisy mean nothing in Gotham; reticence, leisure, repose are the three lost arts. The megaphone is the city's symbol; its chiefest crime, silence.

The girl having finished with the big glass bubble full of tiny fish, picked it up and tossed it aside. For a moment it apparently floated there in space like a soap-bubble. Changing rainbow tints waxed and waned on the surface, growing deeper and more gorgeous until the floating globe glowed scarlet, then suddenly burst into flame and vanished. And only a strange, sweet perfume lingered in the air.

But she gave her perplexed audience no time to wonder; she had seated herself on the stage and was already swiftly busy unfolding a white veil with which she presently covered herself, draping it over her like a tent.

The veil seemed to be translucent; she was apparently visible seated beneath it. But the veil turned into smoke, rising into the air in a thin white cloud; and there, where she had been seated, was a statue of white stone the image of herself! – in all the frail springtide of early adolescence – a white statue, cold, opaque, exquisite in its sculptured immobility.

There came, the next moment, a sound of distant thunder; flashes lighted the blank curtain; and suddenly a vein of lightning and a sharper peal shattered the statue to fragments.

There they lay, broken bits of her own sculptured body, glistening in a heap behind the footlights. Then each fragment began to shimmer with a rosy internal light of its own, until the pile of broken marble glowed like living coals under thickening and reddening vapours. And, presently, dimly perceptible, there she was in the flesh again, seated in the fiery centre of the conflagration, stretching her arms luxuriously, yawning, seemingly awakening from refreshing slumber, her eyes unclosing to rest with a sort of confused apology upon her astounded audience.

As she rose to her feet nothing except herself remained on the stage – no débris, not a shred of smoke, not a spark.

She came down, then, across an inclined plank into the orchestra among the audience.

In the aisle seat nearest her sat Victor Cleves. His business was to be there that evening. But she didn't know that, knew nothing about him – had never before set eyes on him.

At her gesture of invitation he made a cup of both his hands. Into these she poured a double handful of unset diamonds – or what appeared to be diamonds – pressed her own hands above his for a second – and the diamonds in his palms had become pearls.

These were passed around to people in the vicinity, and finally returned to Mr. Cleves, who, at her request, covered the heap of pearls with both his hands, hiding them entirely from view.

At her nod he uncovered them. The pearls had become emeralds. Again, while he held them, and without even touching him, she changed them into rubies. Then she turned away from him, apparently forgetting that he still held the gems, and he sat very still, one cupped hand over the other, while she poured silver coins into a woman's gloved hands, turned them into gold coins, then flung each coin into the air, where it changed to a living, fragrant rose and fell among the audience.

Presently she seemed to remember Cleve, came back down the aisle, and under his close and intent gaze drew from his cupped hands, one by one, a score of brilliant little living birds, which continually flew about her and finally perched, twittering, on her golden headdress – a rainbow-crest of living jewels.

As she drew the last warm, breathing little feathered miracle from Cleves's hands and released it, he said rapidly under his breath: "I want a word with you later. Where?"

She let her clear eyes rest on him for a moment, then with a shrug so slight that it was perceptible, perhaps, only to him, she moved on along the inclined way, stepped daintily over the footlights, caught fire, apparently, nodded to a badly rattled audience, and sauntered off, burning from head to foot.

What applause there was became merged in a dissonant instrumental outburst from the orchestra; the great god Jazz resumed direction, the mindless audience breathed freely again as the curtain rose upon a familiar, yelling turbulence, including all that Gotham really understands and cares for – legs and noise.

Victor Cleves glanced up at the stage, then continued to study the name of the girl on the programme. It was featured in rather pathetic solitude under "*Entr' acte*." And he read further: "During the *entr' acte* Miss Tressa Norne will entertain you with several phases of Black Magic. This strange knowledge was acquired by Miss Norne from the Yezidees, among which almost unknown people still remain descendants of that notorious and formidable historic personage known in the twelfth century as The Old Man of the Mountain – or The Old Man of Mount Alamout.

"The pleasant profession of this historic individual was assassination; and some historians now believe that genuine occult power played a part in his dreadful record – a record which terminated only when the infantry of Genghis Khan took Mount Alamout by storm and hanged the Old Man of the Mountain and burned his body under a boulder of You-Stone.

"For Miss Norne's performance there appears to be no plausible, practical or scientific explanation.

"During her performance the curtain will remain lowered for fifteen minutes and will then rise on the last act of 'You Betcha Life.'"

The noisy show continued while Cleves, paying it scant attention, brooded over the programme. And ever his keen, grey eyes reverted to her name, Tressa Norne.

Then, for a little while, he settled back and let his absent gaze wander over the galloping battalions of painted girls and the slapstick principals whose perpetual motion evoked screams of approbation from the audience amid the din of the great god Jazz.

He had an aisle seat; he disturbed nobody when he went out and around to the stage door.

The aged man on duty took his card, called a boy and sent it off. The boy returned with the card, saying that Miss Norne had already dressed and departed.

Cleves tipped him and then tipped the doorman heavily.

"Where does she live?" he asked.

"Say," said the old man, "I dunno, and that's straight. But them ladies mostly goes up to the roof for a look in at the 'Moonlight Masque' and a dance afterward. Was you ever up there?"

"Yes."

"Seen the new show?"

"No."

"Well, g'wan up while you can get a table. And I bet the little girl will be somewheres around."

"The little girl" *was* "somewheres around." He secured a table, turned and looked about at the vast cabaret into which only a few people had yet filtered, and saw her at a distance in the carpeted corridor buying violets from one of the flower-girls.

A waiter placed a reserve card on his table; he continued on around the outer edge of the auditorium.

Miss Norne had already seated herself at a small table in the rear, and a waiter was serving her with iced orange juice and little French cakes.

When the waiter returned Cleves went up and took off his hat.

"May I talk with you for a moment, Miss Norne?" he said.

The girl looked up, the wheat-straw still between her scarlet lips. Then, apparently recognising in him the young man in the audience who had spoken to her, she resumed her business of imbibing orange juice.

The girl seemed even frailer and younger in her hat and street gown. A silver-fox stole hung from her shoulders; a gold bag lay on the table under the bunch of violets.

She paid no attention whatever to him. Presently her wheat-straw buckled, and she selected a better one.

He said: "There's something rather serious I'd like to speak to you about if you'll let me. I'm not the sort you evidently suppose. I'm not trying to annoy you."

At that she looked around and upward once more.

Very, very young, but already spoiled, he thought, for the dark-blue eyes were coolly appraising him, and the droop of the mouth had become almost sullen. Besides, traces of paint still remained to incarnadine lip and cheek and there was a hint of hardness in the youthful plumpness of the features.

"Are you a professional?" she asked without curiosity.

"A theatrical man? No."

"Then if you haven't anything to offer me, what is it you wish?"

"I have a job to offer if you care for it and if you are up to it," he said.

Her eyes became slightly hostile:

"What kind of job do you mean?"

"I want to learn something about you first. Will you come over to my table and talk it over?"

"No."

"What sort do you suppose me to be?" he inquired, amused.

"The usual sort, I suppose."

"You mean a Johnny?"

"Yes – of sorts."

She let her insolent eyes sweep him once more, from head to foot.

He was a well-built young man and in his evening dress he had that something about him which placed him very definitely where he really belonged.

"Would you mind looking at my card?" he asked.

He drew it out and laid it beside her, and without stirring she scanned it sideways.

"That's my name and address," he continued. "I'm not contemplating mischief. I've enough excitement in life without seeking adventure. Besides, I'm not the sort who goes about annoying women."

She glanced up at him again:

"You are annoying me!"

"I'm sorry. I was quite honest. Good-night."

He took his *congé* with unhurried amiability; had already turned away when she said:

"Please ... what do you desire to say to me?" He came back to her table:

"I couldn't tell you until I know a little more about you."

"What – do you wish to know?"

"Several things. I could scarcely ask you – go over such matters with you – standing here."

There was a pause; the girl juggled with the straw on the table for a few moments, then, partly turning, she summoned a waiter, paid him, adjusted her stole, picked up her gold bag and her violets and stood up. Then she turned to Cleves and gave him a direct look, which had in it the impersonal and searching gaze of a child.

When they were seated at the table reserved for him the place already was filling rapidly – backwash from the theatres slopped through every aisle – people not yet surfeited with noise, not yet sufficiently sodden by their worship of the great god Jazz.

"Jazz," said Cleves, glancing across his dinner-card at Tressa Norne – "what's the meaning of the word? Do you happen to know?"

"Doesn't it come from the French '*jaser*'?"

He smiled. "Possibly. I'm rather hungry. Are you?"

"Yes."

"Will you indicate your preferences?"

She studied her card, and presently he gave the order.

"I'd like some champagne," she said, "unless you think it's too expensive."

He smiled at that, too, and gave the order.

"I didn't suggest any wine because you seem so young," he said.

"How old do I seem?"

"Sixteen perhaps."

"I am twenty-one."

"Then you've had no troubles."

"I don't know what you call trouble," she remarked, indifferently, watching the arriving throngs.

The orchestra, too, had taken its place.

"Well," she said, "now that you've picked me up, what do you really want of me?" There was no mitigating smile to soften what she said. She dropped her elbows on the table, rested her chin between her palms and looked at him with the same searching, undisturbed expression that is so disconcerting in children. As he made no reply: "May I have a cocktail?" she inquired.

He gave the order. And his mind registered pessimism. "There is nothing doing with this girl," he thought. "She's already on the toboggan." But he said aloud: "That was beautiful work you did down in the theatre, Miss Norne."

"Did you think so?"

"Of course. It was astounding work."

"Thank you. But managers and audiences differ with you."

"Then they are very stupid," he said.

"Possibly. But that does not help me pay my board."

"Do you mean you have trouble in securing theatrical engagements?"

"Yes, I am through here to-night, and there's nothing else in view, so far."

"That's incredible!" he exclaimed.

She lifted her glass, slowly drained it.

For a few moments she caressed the stem of the empty glass, her gaze remote.

"Yes, it's that way," she said. "From the beginning I felt that my audiences were not in sympathy with me. Sometimes it even amounts to hostility. Americans do not like what I do, even if it holds their attention. I don't quite understand why they don't like it, but I'm always conscious they don't. And of course that settles it – to-night has settled the whole thing, once and for all."

"What are you going to do?"

"What others do, I presume."

"What do others do?" he inquired, watching the lovely sullen eyes.

"Oh, they do what I'm doing now, don't they? – let some man pick them up and feed them." She lifted her indifferent eyes. "I'm not criticising you. I meant to do it some day – when I had courage. That's why I just asked you if I might have some champagne – finding myself a little scared at my first step... But you *did* say you might have a job for me. Didn't you?"

"Suppose I haven't. What are you going to do?"

The curtain was rising. She nodded toward the bespangled chorus. "Probably that sort of thing. They've asked me."

Supper was served. They both were hungry and thirsty; the music made conversation difficult, so they supped in silence and watched the imbecile show conceived by vulgarians, produced by vulgarians and served up to mental degenerates of the same species – the average metropolitan audience.

For ten minutes a pair of comedians fell up and down a flight of steps, and the audience shrieked approval.

"Miss Norne?"

The girl who had been watching the show turned in her chair and looked back at him.

"Your magic is by far the most wonderful I have ever seen or heard of. Even in India such things are not done."

"No, not in India," she said, indifferently.

"Where then?"

"In China."

"You learned to do such things there?"

"Yes."

"Where, in China, did you learn such amazing magic?"

"In Yian."

"I never heard of it. Is it a province?"

"A city."

"And you lived there?"

"Fourteen years."

"When?"

"From 1904 to 1918."

"During the great war," he remarked, "you were in China?"

"Yes."

"Then you arrived here very recently."

"In November, from the Coast."

"I see. You played the theatres from the Coast eastward."

"And went to pieces in New York," she added calmly, finishing her glass of champagne.

"Have you any family?" he asked.

"No."

"Do you care to say anything further?" he inquired, pleasantly.

"About my family? Yes, if you wish. My father was in the spice trade in Yian. The Yezidees took Yian in 1910, threw him into a well in his own compound and filled it up with dead imperial troops. I was thirteen years old... The Hassani did that. They held Yian nearly eight years, and I lived with my mother, in a garden pagoda, until 1914. In January of that year Germans got through from Kiaou-Chou. They had been six months on the way. I think they were Hassanis. Anyway, they persuaded the Hassanis to massacre every English-speaking prisoner. And so – my mother died in the garden pagoda of Yian... I was not told for four years."

"Why did they spare you?" he asked, astonished at her story so quietly told, so utterly destitute of emotion.

"I was seventeen. A certain person had placed me among the temple girls in the temple of Erlik. It pleased this person to make of me a Mongol temple girl as a mockery at Christ. They gave me the name Keuke Mongol. I asked to serve the shrine of Kwann-an – she being like to our Madonna. But this person gave me the choice between the halberds of the Tchortchas and the sorcery of Erlik."

She lifted her sombre eyes. "So I learned how to do the things you saw. But – what I did there on the stage is not – respectable."

An odd shiver passed over him. For a second he took her literally, suddenly convinced that her magic was not white but black as the demon at whose shrine she had learned it. Then he smiled and asked her pleasantly, whether indeed she employed hypnosis in her miraculous exhibitions.

But her eyes became more sombre still, and, "I don't care to talk about it," she said. "I have already said too much."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry into professional secrets – "

"I can't talk about it," she repeated. "... Please – my glass is quite empty."

When he had refilled it:

"How did you get away from Yian?" he asked.

"The Japanese."

"What luck!"

"Yes. One battle was fought at Buldak. The Hassanis and Blue Flags were terribly cut up. Then, outside the walls of Yian, Prince Sanang's Tchortcha infantry made a stand. He was there with his Yezidee horsemen, all in leather and silk armour with casques and corselets of black Indian steel.

"I could see them from the temple – saw the Japanese gunners open fire. The Tchortchas were blown to shreds in the blast of the Japanese guns... Sanang got away with some of his Yezidee horsemen."

"Where was that battle?"

"I told you, outside the walls of Yian."

"The newspapers never mentioned any such trouble in China," he said, suspiciously.

"Nobody knows about it except the Germans and the Japanese."

"Who is this Sanang?" he demanded.

"A Yezidee-Mongol. He is one of the Sheiks-el-Djebel – a servant of The Old Man of Mount Alamout."

"What is *he*?"

"A sorcerer – assassin."

"What!" exclaimed Cleves incredulously.

"Why, yes," she said, calmly. "Have you never heard of The Old Man of Mount Alamout?"

"Well, yes – "

"The succession has been unbroken since 1090 B.C. A Hassan Sabbah is still the present Old Man of the Mountain. His Yezidees worship Erlik. They are sorcerers. But you would not believe that."

Cleves said with a smile, "Who is Erlik?"

"The Mongols' Satan."

"Oh! So these Yezidees are devil-worshippers!"

"They are more. They *are* actually devils."

"You don't really believe that even in unexplored China there exists such a creature as a real sorcerer, do you?" he inquired, smilingly.

"I don't wish to talk of it."

To his surprise her face had flushed, and he thought her sensitive mouth quivered a little.

He watched her in silence for a moment; then, leaning a little way across the table:

"Where are you going when the show here closes?"

"To my boarding-house."

"And then?"

"To bed," she said, sullenly.

"And to-morrow what do you mean to do?"

"Go out to the agencies and ask for work."

"And if there is none?"

"The chorus," she said, indifferently.

"What salary have you been getting?"

She told him.

"Will you take three times that amount and work with me?"

CHAPTER IV

BODY AND SOUL

The girl's direct gaze met his with that merciless searching intentness he already knew.

"What do you wish me to do?"

"Enter the service of the United States."

"Wh-what?"

"Work for the Government."

She was too taken aback to answer.

"Where were you born?" he demanded abruptly.

"In Albany, New York," she replied in a dazed way.

"You are loyal to your country?"

"Yes – certainly."

"You would not betray her?"

"No."

"I don't mean for money; I mean from fear."

After a moment, and, avoiding his gaze: "I am afraid of death," she said very simply.

He waited.

"I – I don't know what I might do – being afraid," she added in a troubled voice. "I desire to – live."

He still waited.

She lifted her eyes: "I'd try not to betray my country," she murmured.

"Try to face death for your country's honour?"

"Yes."

"And for your own?"

"Yes; and for my own."

He leaned nearer: "Yet you're taking a chance on your own honour to-night."

She blushed brightly: "I didn't think I was taking a very great chance with you."

He said: "You have found life too hard. And when you faced failure in New York you began to let go of life – real life, I mean. And you came up here to-night wondering whether you had courage to let yourself go. When I spoke to you it scared you. You found you hadn't the courage. But perhaps to-morrow you might find it – or next week – if sufficiently scared by hunger – you might venture to take the first step along the path that you say others usually take sooner or later."

The girl flushed scarlet, sat looking at him out of eyes grown dark with anger.

He said: "You told me an untruth. You *have* been tempted to betray your country. You have resisted. You *have* been threatened with death. You *have* had courage to defy threats and temptations where your country's honour was concerned!"

"How do you know?" she demanded.

He continued, ignoring the question: "From the time you landed in San Francisco you have been threatened. You tried to earn a living by your magician's tricks, but in city after city, as you came East, your uneasiness grew into fear, and your fear into terror, because every day more terribly confirmed your belief that people were following you determined either to use you to their own purposes or to murder you –"

The girl turned quite white and half rose in her chair, then sank back, staring at him out of dilated eyes. Then Cleves smiled: "So you've got the nerve to do Government work," he said, "and you've got the intelligence, and the knowledge, and something else – I don't know exactly what to call it – Skill? Dexterity? Sorcery?" he smiled – "I mean your professional ability. That's what I want –"

that bewildering dexterity of yours, to help your own country in the fight of its life. Will you enlist for service?"

"W-what fight?" she asked faintly.

"The fight with the Red Spectre."

"Anarchy?"

"Yes... Are you ready to leave this place? I want to talk to you."

"Where?"

"In my own rooms."

After a moment she rose.

"I'll go to your rooms with you," she said. She added very calmly that she was glad it was to be his rooms and not some other man's.

Out of countenance, he demanded what she meant, and she said quite candidly that she'd made up her mind to live at any cost, and that if she couldn't make an honest living she'd make a living anyway.

He offered no reply to this until they had reached the street and he had called a taxi.

On their way to his apartment he re-opened the subject rather bluntly, remarking that life was not worth living at the price she had mentioned.

"That is the accepted Christian theory," she replied coolly, "but circumstances alter things."

"Not such things."

"Oh, yes, they do. If one is already damned, what difference does anything else make?"

He asked, sarcastically, whether she considered herself already damned.

She did not reply for a few moments, then she said, in a quick, breathless way, that souls have been entrapped through ignorance of evil. And asked him if he did not believe it.

"No," he said, "I don't."

She shook her head. "You couldn't understand," she said. "But I've made up my mind to one thing; even if my soul has perished, my body shall not die for a long, long time. I mean to live," she added. "I shall not let my body be slain! They shall not steal life from me, whatever they have done to my soul –"

"What in heaven's name are you talking about?" he exclaimed. "Do you actually believe in soul-snatchers and life-stealers?"

She seemed sullen, her profile turned to him, her eyes on the brilliantly lighted avenue up which they were speeding. After a while: "I'd rather live decently and respectably if I can," she said. "That is the natural desire of any girl, I suppose. But if I can't, nevertheless I shall beat off death at any cost. And whatever the price of life is, I shall pay it. Because I am absolutely determined to go on living. And if I can't provide the means I'll have to let some man do it, I suppose."

"It's a good thing it was I who found you when you were out of a job," he remarked coldly.

"I hope so," she said. "Even in the beginning I didn't really believe you meant to be impertinent" – a tragic smile touched her lips – "and I was almost sorry –"

"Are you quite crazy?" he demanded.

"No, my mind is untouched. It's my soul that's gone... Do you know I was very hungry when you spoke to me? The management wouldn't advance anything, and my last money went for my room... Last Monday I had three dollars to face the future – and no job. I spent the last of it to-night on violets, orange juice and cakes. My furs and my gold bag remain. I can go two months more on them. Then it's a job or – ." She shrugged and buried her nose in her violets.

"Suppose I advance you a month's salary?" he said.

"What am I to do for it?"

The taxi stopped at a florist's on the corner of Madison Avenue and 58th Street. Overhead were apartments. There was no elevator – merely the street door to unlock and four dim flights of stairs rising steeply to the top.

He lived on the top floor. As they paused before his door in the dim corridor:

"Are you afraid?" he asked.

She came nearer, laid a hand on his arm:

"Are *you* afraid?"

He stood silent, the latch-key in his hand.

"I'm not afraid of myself – if that is what you mean," he said.

"That is partly what I mean ... you'll have to mount guard over your soul."

"I'll look out for my soul," he retorted dryly.

"Do so. I lost mine. I – I would not wish any harm to yours through our companionship."

"Don't you worry about my soul," he remarked, fitting the key to the lock. But again her hand fell on his wrist:

"Wait. I can't – can't help warning you. Neither your soul nor your body are safe if – if you ever do make of me a companion. I've *got* to tell you this!"

"What are you talking about?" he demanded bluntly.

"Because you have been courteous – considerate – and you *don't* know – oh, you don't realise what spiritual peril is! – What your soul and body have to fear if you – if you win me over – if you ever manage to make of me a friend!"

He said: "People follow and threaten you. We know that. I understand also that association with you involves me, and that I shall no doubt be menaced with bodily harm."

He laid his hand on hers where it still rested on his sleeves:

"But that's my business, Miss Norne," he added with a smile. "So, otherwise, it being merely a plain business affair between you and me, I think I may also venture my immortal soul alone with you in my room."

The girl flushed darkly.

"You have misunderstood," she said.

He looked at her coolly, intently; and arrived at no conclusion. Young, very lovely, confessedly without moral principle, he still could not believe her actually depraved. "What did you mean?" he said bluntly.

"In companionship with the lost, one might lose one's way – unawares... Do you know that there is an Evil loose in the world which is bent upon conquest by *obtaining control of men's minds*?"

"No," he replied, amused.

"And that, through the capture of men's minds and souls the destruction of civilisation is being planned?"

"Is that what you learned in your captivity, Miss Norne?"

"You do not believe me."

"I believe your terrible experiences in China have shaken you to your tragic little soul. Horror and grief and loneliness have left scars on tender, impressionable youth. They would have slain maturity – broken it, crushed it. But youth is flexible, pliable, and bends – gives way under pressure. Scars become slowly effaced. It shall be so with you. You will learn to understand that nothing really can harm the soul."

For a few moments' silence they stood facing each other on the dim landing outside his locked door.

"Nothing can slay our souls," he repeated in a grave voice. "I do not believe you really ever have done anything to wound even your self-respect. I do not believe you are capable of it, or ever have been, or ever will be. But somebody has deeply wounded you, spiritually, and has wounded your mind to persuade you that your soul is no longer in God's keeping. For that is a lie!"

He saw her features working with poignant emotions as though struggling to believe him.

"Souls are never lost," he said. "Ungoverned passions of every sort merely cripple them for a space. God always heals them in the end."

He laid his hand on the door-knob once more and lifted the latch-key.

"Don't!" she whispered, catching his hand again, "if there should be somebody in there waiting for us!"

"There is not a soul in my rooms. My servant sleeps out."

"There *is* somebody there!" she said, trembling.

"Nobody, Miss Norne. Will you come in with me?"

"I don't dare – "

"Why?"

"You and I alone together – no! oh, please – please! I am afraid!"

"Of what?"

"Of – giving you – my c-confidence – and trust – and – and f-friendship."

"I want you to."

"I must not! It would destroy us both, soul and body!"

"I tell you," he said, impatiently, "that there is no destruction of the soul – and it's a clean comradeship anyway – a fighting friendship I ask of you —*all* I ask; all I offer! Wherein, then, lies this peril in being alone together?"

"Because I am finding it in my heart to believe in you, trust you, hold fast to your strength and protection. And if I give way – yield – and if I make you a promise – and *if there is anybody in that room to see us and hear us – then* we shall be destroyed, both of us, soul and body – "

He took her hands, held them until their trembling ceased.

"I'll answer for our bodies. Let God look after the rest. Will you trust Him?"

She nodded.

"And me?"

"Yes."

But her face blanched as he turned the latch-key, switched on the electric light, and preceded her into the room beyond.

The place was one of those accentless, typical bachelor apartments made comfortable for anything masculine, but quite unlivable otherwise.

Live coals still glowed in the hob grate; he placed a lump of cannel coal on the embers, used a bellows vigorously and the flame caught with a greasy crackle.

The girl stood motionless until he pulled up an easy chair for her, then he found another for himself. She let slip her furs, folded her hands around the bunch of violets and waited.

"Now," he said, "I'll come to the point. In 1916 I was at Plattsburg, expecting a commission. The Department of Justice sent for me. I went to Washington where I was made to understand that I had been selected to serve my country in what is vaguely known as the Secret Service – and which includes government agents attached to several departments.

"The great war is over; but I am still retained in the service. Because something more sinister than a hun victory over civilisation threatens this Republic. And threatens the civilised world."

"Anarchy," she said.

"Bolshevism."

She did not stir in her chair.

She had become very white. She said nothing. He looked at her with his quiet, reassuring smile.

"That's what I want of you," he repeated.

"I want your help," he went on, "I want your valuable knowledge of the Orient. I want whatever secret information you possess. I want your rather amazing gifts, your unprecedented experience among almost unknown people, your familiarity with occult things, your astounding powers – whatever they are – hypnotic, psychic, material.

"Because, to-day, civilisation is engaged in a secret battle for existence against gathering powers of violence, the force and limit of which are still unguessed.

"It is a battle between righteousness and evil, between sanity and insanity, light and darkness, God and Satan! And if civilisation does not win, then the world perishes."

She raised her still eyes to his, but made no other movement.

"Miss Norne," he said, "we in the International Service know enough about you to desire to know more."

"We already knew the story you have told to me. Agents in the International Secret Service kept in touch with you from the time that the Japanese escorted you out of China."

"From the day you landed, and all across the Continent to New York, you have been kept in view by agents of this government."

"Here, in New York, my men have kept in touch with you. And now, to-night, the moment has come for a personal understanding between you and me."

The girl's pale lips moved – became stiffly articulate: "I – I wish to live," she stammered, "I fear death."

"I know it. I know what I ask when I ask your help."

She said in the ghost of a voice: "If I turn against *them*– they will kill me."

"They'll try," he said quietly.

"They will not fail, Mr. Cleves."

"That is in God's hands."

She became deathly white at that.

"No," she burst out in an agonised voice, "it is not in God's hands! If it were, I should not be afraid! It is in the hands of those who stole my soul!"

She covered her face with both arms, fairly writhing on her chair.

"If the Yezidees have actually made you believe any such nonsense" – he began; but she dropped her arms and stared at him out of terrible blue eyes:

"I don't want to die, I tell you! I am afraid! —*afraid!* If I reveal to you what I know they'll kill me. If I turn against them and aid you, they'll slay my body, and send it after my soul!"

She was trembling so violently that he sprang up and went to her. After a moment he passed one arm around her shoulders and held her firmly, close to him.

"Come," he said, "do your duty. Those who enlist under the banner of Christ have nothing to dread in this world or the next."

"If – if I could believe I were safe there."

"I tell you that you are. So is every human soul! What mad nonsense have the Yezidees made you believe? Is there any surer salvation for the soul than to die in Christ's service?"

He slipped his arm from her quivering shoulders and grasped both her hands, crushing them as though to steady every fibre in her tortured body.

"I want you to live. I want to live, too. But I tell you it's in God's hands, and we soldiers of civilisation have nothing to fear except failure to do our duty. Now, then, are we comrades under the United States Government?"

"O God – I – dare not!"

"Are we?"

Perhaps she felt the physical pain of his crushing grip for she turned and looked him in the eyes.

"I don't want to die," she whispered. "Don't make me!"

"Will you help your country?"

The terrible directness of her child's gaze became almost unendurable to him.

"Will you offer your country your soul and body?" he insisted in a low, tense voice.

Her stiff lips formed a word.

"Yes!" he exclaimed.

"Yes."

For a moment she rested against his shoulder, deathly white, then in a flash she had straightened, was on her feet in one bound and so swiftly that he scarcely followed her movement – was unaware that she had risen until he saw her standing there with a pistol glittering in her hand, her eyes fixed on the portières that hung across the corridor leading to his bedroom.

"What on earth," he began, but she interrupted him, keeping her gaze focused on the curtains, and the pistol resting level on her hip.

"I'll answer you if I die for it!" she cried. "I'll tell you everything I know! You wish to learn what is this monstrous evil that threatens the world with destruction – what you call anarchy and Bolshevism? It is an Evil that was born before Christ came! It is an Evil which not only destroys cities and empires and men but which is more terrible still for it obtains control of the human mind, and uses it at will; and it obtains sovereignty over the soul, and makes it prisoner. Its aim is to dominate first, then to destroy. It was conceived in the beginning by Erlik and by Sorcerers and devils... Always, from the first, there have been sorcerers and living devils.

"And when human history began to be remembered and chronicled, devils were living who worshiped Erlik and practised sorcery.

"They have been called by many names. A thousand years before Christ Hassan Sabbah founded his sect called Hassanis or Assassins. The Yezidees are of them. Their Chief is still called Sabbah; their creed is the annihilation of civilisation!"

Cleves had risen. The girl spoke in a clear, accentless monotone, not looking at him, her eyes and pistol centred on the motionless curtains.

"Look out!" she cried sharply.

"What is the matter?" he demanded. "Do you suppose anybody is hidden behind that curtain in the passageway?"

"If there is," she replied in her excited but distinct voice, "here is a tale to entertain him:

"The Hassanis are a sect of assassins which has spread out of Asia all over the world, and they are determined upon the annihilation of everything and everybody in it except themselves!

"In Germany is a branch of the sect. The hun is the lineal descendant of the ancient Yezidee; the gods of the hun are the old demons under other names; the desire and object of the hun is the same desire – to rule the minds and bodies and souls of men and use them to their own purposes!"

She lifted her pistol a little, came a pace forward:

"Anarchist, Yezidee, Hassani, Boche, Bolshevik – all are the same – all are secretly swarming in the hidden places for the same purpose!"

The girl's blue eyes were aflame, now, and the pistol was lifting slowly in her hand to a deadly level.

"Sanang!" she cried in a terrible voice.

"Sanang!" she cried again in her terrifying young voice – "Toad! Tortoise egg! Spittle of Erlik! May the Thirty Thousand Calamities overtake you! Sheik-el-Djebel! – cowardly Khan whom I laughed at from the temple when it rained yellow snakes on the marble steps when all the gongs in Yian sounded in your frightened ears!"

She waited.

"What! You won't step out? *Tokhta!*" she exclaimed in a ringing tone, and made a swift motion with her left hand. Apparently out of her empty open palm, like a missile hurled, a thin, blinding beam of light struck the curtains, making them suddenly transparent.

A man stood there.

He came out, moving very slowly as though partly stupefied. He wore evening dress under his overcoat, and had a long knife in his right hand.

Nobody spoke.

"So – I really was to die then, if I came here," said the girl in a wondering way.

Sanang's stealthy gaze rested on her, stole toward Cleves. He moistened his lips with his tongue. "You deliver me to this government agent?" he asked hoarsely.

"I deliver nobody by treachery. You may go, Sanang."

He hesitated, a graceful, faultless, metropolitan figure in top-hat and evening attire. Then, as he started to move, Cleves covered him with his weapon.

"I can't let that man go free!" cried Cleves angrily.

"Very well!" she retorted in a passionate voice – "then take him if you are able! *Tokhta!* Look out for yourself!"

Something swift as lightning struck the pistol from his grasp, – blinded him, half stunned him, set him reeling in a drenching blaze of light that blotted out all else.

He heard the door slam; he stumbled, caught at the back of a chair while his senses and sight were clearing.

"By heavens!" he whispered with ashen lips, "you – you *are* a sorceress – or something. What – what, are you doing to me?"

There was no answer. And when his vision cleared a little more he saw her crouched on the floor, her head against the locked door, listening, perhaps – or sobbing – he scarcely understood which until the quiver of her shoulders made it plainer.

When at last Cleves went to her and bent over and touched her she looked up at him out of wet eyes, and her grief-drawn mouth quivered.

"I – I don't know," she sobbed, "if he truly stole away my soul – there – there in the temple dusk of Yian. But he – he stole my heart – for all his wickedness – Sanang, Prince of the Yezidees – and I have been fighting him for it all these years – all these long years – fighting for what he stole in the temple dusk!.. And now – now I have it back – my heart – all broken to pieces – here on the floor behind your – your bolted door."

CHAPTER V

THE ASSASSINS

On the wall hung a map of Mongolia, that indefinite region a million and a half square miles in area, vast sections of which have never been explored.

Turkestan and China border it on the south, and Tibet almost touches it, not quite.

Even in the twelfth century, when the wild Mongols broke loose and nearly overran the world, the Tibet infantry under Genghis, the Tchortcha horsemen drafted out of Black China, and a great cloud of Mongol cavalry under the Prince of the Vanguard commanding half a hundred Hezars, never penetrated that grisly and unknown waste. The "Eight Towers of the Assassins" guarded it – still guard it, possibly.

The vice-regent of Erlik, Prince of Darkness, dwelt within this unknown land. And dwells there still, perhaps.

In front of this wall-map stood Tressa Norne.

Behind her, facing the map, four men were seated – three of them under thirty.

These three were volunteers in the service of the United States Government – men of independent means, of position, who had volunteered for military duty at the outbreak of the great war. However, they had been assigned by the Government to a very different sort of duty no less exciting than service on the fighting line, but far less conspicuous, for they had been drafted into the United States Department of Justice.

The names of these three were Victor Cleves, a professor of ornithology at Harvard University before the war; Alexander Selden, junior partner in the banking firm of Milwyn, Selden, and Co., and James Benton, a New York architect.

The fourth man's name was John Recklow. He might have been over fifty, or under. He was well-built, in a square, athletic way, clear-skinned and ruddy, grey-eyed, quiet in voice and manner. His hair and moustache had turned silvery. He had been employed by the Government for many years. He seemed to be enormously interested in what Miss Norne was saying.

Also he was the only man who interrupted her narrative to ask questions. And his questions revealed a knowledge which was making the girl more sensitive and uneasy every moment.

Finally, when she spoke of the Scarlet Desert, he asked if the Scarlet Lake were there and if the Xin was still supposed to inhabit its vermilion depths. And at that she turned and looked at him, her forefinger still resting on the map.

"Where have you ever heard of the Scarlet Lake and the Xin?" she asked as though frightened.

Recklow said quietly that as a boy he had served under Gordon and Sir Robert.

"If, as a boy, you served under Chinese Gordon, you already know much of what I have told you, Mr. Recklow. Is it not true?" she demanded nervously.

"That makes no difference," he replied with a smile. "It is all very new to these three young gentlemen. And as for myself, I am checking up what you say and comparing it with what I heard many, many years ago when my comrade Barres and I were in Yian."

"Did you really know Sir Robert Hart?"

"Yes."

"Then why do you not explain to these gentlemen?"

"Dear child," he interrupted gently, "what did Chinese Gordon or Sir Robert Hart, or even my comrade Barres, or I myself know about occult Asia in comparison to what you know? – a girl who has actually served the mysteries of Erlik for four amazing years!"

She paled a trifle, came slowly across the room to where Recklow was seated, laid a timid hand on his sleeve.

"Do you believe there are sorcerers in Asia?" she asked with that child-like directness which her wonderful blue eyes corroborated.

Recklow remained silent.

"Because," she went on, "if, in your heart, you do not believe this to be an accursed fact, then what I have to say will mean nothing to any of you."

Recklow touched his short, silvery moustache, hesitating. Then:

"The worship of Erlik is devil worship," he said. "Also I am entirely prepared to believe that there are, among the Yezidees, adepts who employ scientific weapons against civilisation – who have probably obtained a rather terrifying knowledge of psychic laws which they use scientifically, and which to ordinary, God-fearing folk appear to be the black magic of sorcerers."

Cleves said: "The employment by the huns of poison gases and long-range cannon is a parallel case. Before the war we could not believe in the possibility of a cannon that threw shells a distance of seventy miles."

The girl still addressed herself to Recklow: "Then you do not believe there are real sorcerers in Asia, Mr. Recklow?"

"Not sorcerers with supernatural powers for evil. Only degenerate human beings who, somehow, have managed to tap invisible psychic currents, and have learned how to use terrific forces about which, so far, we know practically nothing."

She spoke again in the same uneasy voice: "Then you do not believe that either God or Satan is involved?"

"No," he replied smilingly, "and you must not so believe."

"Nor the – the destruction of human souls," she persisted; "you do not believe it is being accomplished to-day?"

"Not in the slightest, dear young lady," he said cheerfully.

"Do you not believe that to have been instructed in such unlawful knowledge is damning? Do you not believe that ability to employ unknown forces is forbidden of God, and that to disobey His law means death to the soul?"

"No!"

"That it is the price one pays to Satan for occult power over people's minds?" she insisted.

"Hypnotic suggestion is not one of the cardinal sins," explained Recklow, still smiling – "unless wickedly employed. The Yezidee priesthood is a band of so-called sorcerers only because of their wicked employment of whatever hypnotic and psychic knowledge they may have obtained.

"There was nothing intrinsically wicked in the huns' discovery of phosgene. But the use they made of it made devils out of them. My ability to manufacture phosgene gas is no crime. But if I manufacture it and use it to poison innocent human beings, then, in that sense, I am, perhaps, a sort of modern sorcerer."

Tressa Norne turned paler:

"I had better tell you that I *have* used – forbidden knowledge – which the Yezidees taught me in the temple of Erlik."

"Used it how?" demanded Cleves.

"To – to earn a living... And once or twice to defend myself."

There was the slightest scepticism in Recklow's bland smile. "You did quite right, Miss Norne."

She had become very white now. She stood beside Recklow, her back toward the suspended map, and looked in a scared sort of way from one to the other of the men seated before her, turning finally to Cleves, and coming toward him.

"I – I once killed a man," she said with a catch in her breath.

Cleves reddened with astonishment. "Why did you do that?" he asked.

"He was already on his way to kill me in bed."

"You were perfectly right," remarked Recklow coolly.

"I don't know ... I was in bed... And then, on the edge of sleep, I felt his mind groping to get hold of mine – feeling about in the darkness to get hold of my brain and seize it and paralyse it."

All colour had left her face. Cleves gripped the arm of his chair and watched her intently.

"I – I had only a moment's mental freedom," she went on in a ghost of a voice. "I was just able to rouse myself, fight off those murderous brain-fingers – let loose a clear mental ray... And then, O God! I saw him in his room with his Kalmuck knife – saw him already on his way to murder me – Gutchlug Khan, the Yezidee – looking about in his bedroom for a shroud... And when – when he reached for the bed to draw forth a fine, white sheet for the shroud without which no Yezidee dares journey deathward – then —*then* I became frightened... And I killed him – I slew him there in his hotel bedroom on the floor above mine!"

Selden moistened his lips: "That Oriental, Gutchlug, died from heart-failure in a San Francisco hotel," he said. "I was there at the time."

"He died by the fangs of a little yellow snake," whispered the girl.

"There was no snake in his room," retorted Cleves.

"And no wound on his body," added Selden. "I attended the autopsy."

She said, faintly: "There was no snake, and no wound, as you say... Yet Gutchlug died of both there in his bedroom... And before he died he heard his soul bidding him farewell; and he saw the death-adder coiled in the sheet he clutched – saw the thing strike him again and again – saw and felt the tiny wounds on his left hand; felt the fangs pricking deep, deep into the veins; died of it there within the minute – died of the swiftest poison known. And yet – "

She turned her dead-white face to Cleves – "And yet *there was no snake there!*... And never had been... And so I – I ask you, gentlemen, if souls do not die when minds learn to fight death with death – and deal it so swiftly, so silently, while one's body lies, unstirring on a bed – in a locked room on the floor below – "

She swayed a little, put out one hand rather blindly.

Recklow rose and passed a muscular arm around her; Cleves, beside her, held her left hand, crushing it, without intention, until she opened her eyes with a cry of pain.

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