

THE OLD MAN OF THE MOUNTAINS

By LAWRENCE DAKIN

THE splendid old mind of Imam Mowaffak was clean, unruffled as the waters of Demavend. And when he spoke to his three pupils, Hasan Ben Sabbah, Omar Khayyam and Nizam-ul-Mulk in his garden at Naishapur, there came to them an air of wisdom which had the freshness and purity of mountain water. It stirred the soul and made even their silence communicative. Only when the wise old man looked into the black depths of Hasan's eyes did he seem troubled; then his voice changed, became sharper as if a chill air swept hastily over the naked white beauty of his spirit and from it came cries of pain. Then he would lift his warm aged face to Omar his loved pupil and into it would come peace. The peace that follows the storm and he would continue:

"Look to the Rose that blows about us—"Lo,
"Laughing," she says, "into the World I blow;
"At once the silken Tassel of my Purse
"Tear, and its Treasure on the Garden throw"

Around them and among them the revered voice fell. Like the chime of distant small bells it came to them laden with the beauty of wisdom. Then Nizam-ul-Mulk would smile his warm, cheerful smile. In his mind's eye he could see the loved old teacher cutting the knot of human fate, and scattering before them the treasures of the world. Omar more distant and dreamy heard the laughter of the fountains, the singing of the winds and the small sighing of the young Spring rose. But Hasan looked on the endless, streaming pageant of life, weak, rich and aimless and he coveted those riches.

Soon afterwards the three students completed their studies, and taking leave of their beloved teacher came to the crossways of life. Before parting from each other Hasan declared that it was the universal belief that the pupils of Imam Mowaffak would attain to fortune. But if it so happened that fate should deny her favours to all three, without doubt one of them would acquire power and riches. "Then," said Hasan, "let us make a vow, that to whomsoever this fortune falls, he shall share it equally with the rest, and reserve no pre-eminence for himself." To this the three friends agreed, and on the face of Allah they pledged their words.

The years rolled on and with their passing each left to the three friends that portion of success or failure which the fates had allotted. Nizam-ul-Mulk had been the most fortunate. Under the Sultanate of Sultan Alp Arslan he rose to be first minister of his country. And with his rise to power came his old school friends to claim a share in his good fortune. The Vizier was generous and kept his word. Hasan who was the first to present himself demanded a place in the Government which the Vizier granted. And Omar who came with a song on his lips and a prayer in his heart for the welfare of his friend, asked but to be allowed to live in a corner under the shadow of his fortune to spread wide the veil of beauty and the advantages of science. He was not covetous. For him there was no glory in the material things of life. He wished but a little hour or two of peace to dream out his dreams. For he said:

“The Worldly Hope men set their Hearts upon
Turns Ashes—or it prospers; and anon,
Like Snow upon the Desert’s dusty Face
Lighting a little Hour or two—is gone”.

The Vizier was grateful for Omar’s sincerity and granted him a yearly pension of 1200 Mithkals of gold from the treasury of Naishapur, which he used to erect a monument of beauty around which “the loveliest and the best” would forever gather.

But Hasan was covetous and envied the riches and power of his friend. He was not content to win slow recognition and plunged into intrigue to supplant his benefactor. But through some friend loyal to his master Hasan was discovered and fell into disgrace. There was then no place in the ordered society of the East for him. He had raised his hand against his Sultan and against his friend and he had failed. His Persian subtlety deep and dark as the Dead Sea had availed him nothing. He was forever an outcast, a wanderer in that purgatory of life, “that just divides the desert from the sown.” There where the Prince of the Powers of Darkness walks at night gathering the outcasts of the world; taking the bodies of weak folk in moments of weakness and using them for evil. There He found Hasan, the pupil of Mowaffak and placed him at the head of the *Ismailians*, a band of fanatics who had long murmured in obscurity, and wanted only the guidance of a strong and evil will to set their brandishing daggers against the world.

Through Him who went up and down the world and to and fro in it he would win to fame and fortune. He now knew why

Mowaffak was uneasy in his presence. The old teacher had probed the secret of his destiny. It was evil. Wickedness, covetousness, cruelty and vengeance were to make him as immortal as Omar, and as powerful as the Sultan. He would control people, states and the fortunes of states. They were all pawns in his hand, pieces to be played, and he repeated to himself a shred of remembered wisdom:

"Tis all a Chequer-board of Nights and Days
Where Destiny with Men for Pieces plays;
Hither and thither moves, and mates, and slays,
And one by one back in the Closet lays".

Then in that darkness before dawn, he mounted his horse and placing himself at the head of the *Ismailians*, cried:

"Awake! for Morning in the Bowl of Night
Has flung the Stone that puts the Stars to Flight."

And they rode away into the mountains of Rudbar and seized the Castle of Alamut, which Hasan made his fortress home and became The Old Man of the Mountains, the King of the Assassins and the greatest wizard of all time.

All the subtleties of the world's dark knowledge were known to the Old Man of the Mountains. In the din of that hour before dawn he had lost the impatient rashness of Hasan and had become old. The Eternal One had stripped his body of the fires of youth and had given him the aged grey patience of the mountains. He now held the key to the twenty four thrones of wisdom. The Prince of Countenances had invested him with the powers of the Flowering Rod of Aaron, The Sword of David and the Blue Dagger of the Dark Hand of Moab. He had but to raise his hand in the sign of two, five and seven, and out of the earth, out of the sea, out of the depths of the Shades came the demons of the world to shatter the pillars of mens' resistance.

But he was patient. He could look into the firmament, and beyond the veil of the infinite. He was eternal, and the vain, frail thrones of the world were swinging dizzily around him.

By the sign of the Three-Fingers which had enclosed the earth he had transformed the gardens of the Castle of Alamut into "the Paradise to come." There he kept the beautiful women of all ages and the passionate young men of the earth. In this garden unearthly and strange the fiery youths lived surrounded by mysterious women, voluptuous and lovely, and rich mystical flowers, made restless in their dreams by the touch

of mountain winds. And if any king or king's minister waxed in power and stored for himself the gems and treasures of distant lands The Old Man of the Mountains would call one of the young men, place a dagger in his hand and send him into the world to dispose of him and bring the treasures of his kingdom to Alamut.

Thus the Old Man of the Mountains lived and ever he grew in riches and in power. And when the Crusaders came fierce as flames and passionate as the banners of Heaven, he sent forth his *Ismailian* horsemen maddened with the opiate of Indian *bhang* and drove them from the land. And when the horsemen returned he admitted them to the gardens of Alamut, and they believed that they had died in battle and were feted by the Angels, so beautiful were the women in his garden.

One only had he spared within the range of his power. This was his school companion of Naishapur, Nizam-ul-Mulk, who had continued to grow and smile kindly on his friend Omar, whose fame was spreading into many lands and whose songs were on the lips of the people. But the Vizier's presence was an eternal reproach to him and he was torn between his passion for the friend of his youth and the politician who had been the cause of his banishment. And one night when the moon was crossing the river, a young Prince came singing on his horse, a song which he knew to be Omar's:

"Ah, Moon of my Delight who know'st no wane;
The Moon of Heav'n is rising once again;
How oft hereafter rising shall she look
Through this same Garden after me in vain."

The Old Man of the Mountains put out black magic and drew him to his castle and placing a dagger in his hand sent him into the world once again to kill his friend Nizam-ul-Mulk, and cast his *Wasyat*, or Memorial for Statesmen into the fires of Alamut. And when the young Prince had slain the Vizier and consigned his Memorial to the flames, the Old Man admitted him into his garden and the Prince believed that he had died and had come to the Court of Beautiful Princesses, and he sang:

"A Book of Verses underneath the Bough,
A Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread—and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness—
Oh, Wilderness were Paradise enow."

The Old Man of the Mountains smiled. The young Prince had completed his task. The last of his enemies had been

destroyed. He was entitled to his dream. The Old Man raised his eyes deep, dark and heavy with the power of evil, and looked into old days and days that are to come. Never again would there be a power in the East, a power whose riches would be greater than the wishes of the Old Man of the Mountains, the King of the Assassins, and pulling a grape from an overhanging vine he pressed it between his fingers and said:

"Folks.....
... daub his Visage with the smoke of Hell;
And talk of some strict Testing of us—Pish!
He's a Good Fellow, and 'twill all be well".

And he passed into the treasury of Alamut and disappeared.