

The Palace of al-Tir al-Abtan
by Lawrence Watt-Evans

This is a tale of the wizard al-Tir al-Abtan, when he dwelt in the ancient city of Tahrir, on the shore of the southern sea.

The Palace of al-Tir al-Abtan stood, of the wizard's choice, in the poorest quarter of Tahrir. To reach it, a determined traveler would find himself required to pass through alleys that were little more than tunnels through crumbling piles of brick, and down streets that were no more than mud-filled gaps between one decrepit tenement and the next. The Most Profound Tir, the great magician of the age, had raised his palace here to avoid the petty intrigues of lesser wizards, and the maddening importunities of nobles and kings upon his time and talent. He did not care directly to refuse the lords of the earth admission to his palace, for that would mean constant harassment by those seeking exceptions or an end to the ban; but instead, he put the palace where no self-respecting nobleman would dare approach it, and where those who did approach it could be freely dealt with.

The Most Profound Tir made it impossible for any save himself to find a gate in the outer wall of his residence. Whether the gate was concealed somehow, or moved about, or did not actually exist at all was a matter of much debate among the people of Tahrir. Certainly, when he chose to enter or leave, a gate appeared, but no one else could ever find it again afterward, or remember just where it had been. Thus did the wizard guard his privacy, and for fully a century his palace remained inviolate, while he grew in necromantic prowess, and those about him lived and died; and in all those years that passed without touching his citadel, no man or woman other than al-Tir al-Abtan saw the inside of the marble walls that separated the palace grounds from the remainder of the city. Even when the magician himself was away about the world, the palace was said to be guarded by a demon, or ghoul, that none saw but all feared. It was said, also, that other creatures, equally terrible, patrolled the gardens. As tales grow in the telling, it was soon rumored that Tir used djinni and afrits as his household slaves, and his palace was shunned as an unholy and fearsome place, even when unrest came upon the city. And unrest did come, for it happened that, many years after al-Tir al-Abtan completed the construction of his vast edifice, a foolish and evil man ascended the throne as Sultan of Tahrir, one Selim ibn Jafar. This sultan so oppressed his people that those who could, fled the city, leaving behind only the poor and wretched, who knew that they would be no more welcome elsewhere. Thus, while the magician's palace remained untouched, the condition of the city about it grew ever worse. The loathsome stench of poverty spread across the city, as beggars, thieves, whores, and cutthroats played an ever-larger role in the life of Tahrir. The city became as a stinking swamp about the foot of the Sultan's throne, and like a rising tide about a seaside rock the decay closed in, as more and more of the wealthy fled the city, allowing their homes to be overrun by the starving beggars and bloody-handed thieves. The rot came ever nearer to the Sultan's Palace, as if to surround it as it already surrounded Tir's palace. The Sultan Selim ibn Jafar was not totally insensible to this situation, and in the fourth year of his reign he could no longer stand the idea of his home being lost amid filth and poverty. He did not see that his own actions were the cause, but rather cursed Allah, in his folly, for sending this blight upon his city. He declared open war upon his own people, accusing them of treason in their failure to maintain his city despite the burdens he placed upon them and the mistreatment and injustice he perpetrated. His men were sent out with torches, instructed to burn the tenements and brothels to the ground; but most of these soldiers simply disappeared forever in the maze of streets, either through desertion or because the unhappy citizens had ambushed them and cut their throats. The fires that began were short-lived and ineffective.

The only outcome was the incitement for the populace, and it was then that the Sultanate of Tahrir ended, as the sultan's subjects stormed the palace, and tore it stone from stone, and treated all those within its walls in barbarous fashion, leaving none whole enough to be recognized.

When the Sultan's corpse lay sprawled upon the floor of his own throne room, and his head adorned a spike on his own gate, the beggar-king who had led the mob and usurped the throne looked about himself and was well pleased with what he saw. His ragged followers had slaughtered every noble and man of wealth left in the city, staining the floors of the remaining great houses with their blood; he was absolute ruler of everything in Tahrir.

Everything, that is, except the palace of al-Tir al-Abtan.

That, the beggar King saw, would not do. He did not intend to let anyone remain who might interfere with his rule.

He knew that the palace was the work of a mighty magician, and he did not care to face such a foe himself. Instead, the new overlord of Tahrir determined to send a single expert thief into the Palace, to see whether the enchanter, whom no one had seen in years, still lived.

Chosen for this task was a lad of twenty, whose name was Abu al-Din; this name was known throughout much of the city as the most promising housebreaker of the time. He was a bold and brash fellow, and when news of his selection reached him he proudly accepted the commission as his due. The King summoned him to the royal presence, and charged him as follows:

"You will enter the palace of the wizard al-Tir al-Abtan, by surmounting the wall that guards it, since there is no gate to be found. You will explore the grounds, taking careful note of all traps, pitfalls, and sentinels; you will enter the palace, and learn as best you can its plan and arrangement, once again taking note of all safeguards. Should you be spotted by any resident, slay him; should you find the necromancer, alive or dead, bring back his head. Do you understand?" Abu al-Din nodded and said, "I understand, and I obey." He bowed low, with perhaps a touch of mockery in his action, and then took himself quickly home to his little attic to prepare. Perhaps thirty enthusiastic fellow citizens followed him, calling advice and encouragement, and waited outside his window to see if he would actually do as he had promised, and enter the demon's lair. Abu ignored them. He ate a fine meal, but not a heavy one, while he considered what to bring. He knew nothing of what he would face, and therefore could not prepare for any specific dangers. Since all other magicians of degree had departed Tahrir, he could not obtain any magic to aid him. At last he decided to equip himself as he would for any ordinary housebreaking, and trust in luck and the will of Allah to see him through. He wore a robe with a stout quilted front that would turn a light blow. He wrapped a long, strong rope about his waist, and tied its end to a heavy iron hook that he hung on his left shoulder. He bore a good, long dagger on his belt. Nothing else. He was followed through the streets by a small crowd of well-wishers, but when he came at last to the avenue that ran along the palace wall, when he faced that black marble barrier, he was suddenly alone. His entourage had faded into the shadowy alleys, terrified of the legendary power of the archimage beyond. Whistling loudly, to show any watchers he knew were there his lack of fear, Abu flung his hook, trailing rope, over the wall; on the second toss, the barbed iron hook caught and held. He clambered quickly up the line. At the top of the wall he turned and waved briefly and bravely to his unseen audience; then he turned and looked down at the palace grounds.

He saw nothing. Though the sun was bright overhead, it was as if he peered into a deep, dark cave.

Puzzled, he gathered up the rope and peered into the gloom, trying to make out any detail at all.

He could not. The blackness was impenetrable.

Cautiously, he freed his hook from its lodgment on the wall's inner edge and then lowered it slowly down into the dark.

After a moment's descent he heard it strike ground with a muffled thump; as he handed down more rope the line grew slack.

Something, he knew, was down there, something that seemed to support the iron hook without difficulty.

A shiver of apprehension ran through him, and he glanced back out at the surrounding streets.

He saw no one, but he knew that he was being watched. He would not, he swore silently to himself, show himself a coward so quickly as this!

He pulled up the hook, secured it solidly to the wall's outer edge, and then with a prayer and a gulp of air lowered himself down into the blackness.

His feet and legs vanished, yet he felt no different. Then his body was gone. And finally, as his head fell below the top of the wall, he was engulfed in darkness-but only for an instant, and then he was below the blackness and able to see a fine grassy sward just below him, no more than a man's height away, surrounded by flowering bushes.

He looked up, and saw the blue sky and bright sun, and he smiled.

"A conjuror's trick, no more!" he told himself quietly. He quickly pulled himself back up onto the wall, freed the hook, and then, gathering up the ropes once more, he dropped down inside. To the watchers in the alleys, he was gone, and did not return, and gradually, as the sun descended the western sky, they grew bored and drifted away.

Inside the wall, Abu landed catlike, crouched and ready for anything-or so he thought to himself.

When he saw his surroundings, however, his alert eyes glazed slightly. He was in a garden, a garden like none he had ever imagined. Raised in the streets, he had rarely seen any gardens save those scraggly patches of vegetables and herbs in back lots and on rooftops that some of the frugal citizens of Tahrir cultivated. Now he faced a garden like no other anywhere; even the late Court Gardener to Selim ibn Jafar would have been amazed. Blossoms were piled high on every side, a profusion, a myriad of flowers, all vividly colored, varied in size from tiny pinpricks of gold and scarlet to vast parasols of azure and white with petals each as broad as a man's height. All about the thief, save only behind him where the black marble wall stood, were flowers; it seemed as though he had landed in the only clear spot to be found, and that was only a tiny patch of grass scarce big enough for him to stand upon. He marveled that he had somehow not seen this fantastic beauty when he clambered down his rope, and could only guess that it somehow connected with the wizard's illusory darkness. After a few moments, with a shake of his head Abu recovered his senses. He was not to be put off by a bunch of flowers! He stepped forward, and his leg brushed a nearby blossom, a

yard-wide whorl of purple and black; and as though released from long bondage, there burst forth all about him the perfume of the flowers, like all the incense of all the world's mosques and temples in one place, pouring out on all sides. He was breathing in thick clouds of scent, such sweet scent as cannot be described. He could not catch his breath, for the perfume so filled him that his lungs could not take in air. In desperation, he drew his blade, flinging his arm out as far as he could and slashed at the mockingly beautiful blossoms. Then he was spinning, and the world went dark. He came to later, he never knew how much later, and found himself lying on the sward, green and smooth, untroubled by the flowers. He could still smell their perfume, but was no longer overpowered by it. Looking up from where he lay he could see no blossoms nor leaves. He stood up warily. Before him, twisted hideously, the purple-and-sable flower that he had first touched lay on the grass. Its thorny stem was slashed through where his dagger had cut it, and from the slash flowed fresh red blood.

The lower portion of the stem did not end in a rooted stalk, but in a narrow green body with a whiplike tail, four short legs, and scaly feet, like those of a great lizard.

Shuddering, he wiped his blade on the lawn and looked about him.

Behind him was the marble wall; to either side was empty grass, and the dreadful gardens stood beyond. Abu realized that even these strange and magical flowers are delicate things. The death of one had frightened away the other plants.

He was sure he had nothing more to fear from the gardens if he kept his wits about him. He looked on to the next obstacle.

Ahead of him was another wall, a dozen paces away across the green, not the wall of the palace but another line of defense, this one only a little taller than his head, and surely no higher than his reach. It appeared to be made of ivory, though he could make out little detail from where he stood. The sun was very low in the west, and already the day's light was fading.

He looked down at the plant-creature he had slain, and kicked at the dead thing, wondering if perhaps he should dispose of it; a sharp pain in his foot informed him that a needlelike thorn as long as his index finger had passed right through his leather boots into his flesh. Upon pulling his foot away he saw that behind the petals the entire upper part of the plant was a ghastly mass of dull-green thorns, all razor sharp and strong as steel.

After removing his boot, bandaging the wound as best he could with a strip torn from the hem of his robe, and slipping the boot back carefully so as not to dislodge the cloth, he limped across the grass to the ivory barrier.

Beyond this inner wall he could see the glistening crystal and stone of the palace itself, its tiled domes flashing and bright in the slanting sunlight. The ivory wall proved not to be completely solid; there were small openings between the carved figures. A curious feature was the nature of the carvings themselves, for each was a different variety of serpent; Abu saw among them vipers, adders, cobras, and a thousand others. Some were such as are not known any longer among men. That was nothing to Abu. Undaunted by the fearsome appearance of the wall, and seeing that the openings made excellent handholds, he leapt up to climb it; but scarce had he left the ground when he felt the ivory writhe beneath his hands. He almost began to drop back, but then thought better of it, and instead, with all his strength, he vaulted over, to land rolling upon a stone-paved terrace. Behind him, the carved serpents hissed, twisting venomously about each other; for one terrible

instant he thought they were preparing to follow him. At last, though, they stilled, and were again only lifeless ivory. Trembling, Abu lay upon the flags; then, slowly, he got again to his feet, wincing as he put pressure on his wounded foot. He was on a broad, paved terrace, bounded on one side by the ivory barricade, on two sides by decorative pools and fountains, and on the last by the palace that was his goal. The palace wall was blank, however; there were no doors, no windows, no opening of any sort. High above colored tiles adorned the roof edge, but otherwise the wall was sheer and flat and featureless. Abu saw no hope of gaining entry there. Instead, he turned to his right and limped to the little stone-rimmed ponds that edged the terrace. He saw hundreds of good-sized pools, scattered as irregularly as the stars in the heavens for as far as he could see, each with a fountain in its center, and paths of translucent golden bricks, like amber, wound between them. Each pool was lit from beneath by some means the thief could not fathom, and each glowed a different hue. Abu watched the fountains dance and play in the gathering dusk; they were, like the flowers, much more beautiful than anything in his previous experience. He wondered if they, too, held some hidden menace; their gentle hissing began to seem somehow ominous to him. Still, he had to go on, for he had a task to perform, and did not care to go back over the ivory serpents into the gardens of the poisonous lizard-legged flowers. He could do nothing with the blank walls of the palace; an attempt to scale them, even if successful, might do no good, since he had no reason to believe that there were openings in the roof. He could see no end to the expanse of fountains; it seemed to continue forever. He had already noticed that the grounds inside the wall seemed to be much more extensive than the length of the wall, as seen from outside, could contain, but after all, this palace had been raised by magic, and he had already seen, coming over the wall, that its master was not above the use of illusions. Surely, the water garden did not, in truth, go on forever. If he walked steadily in one direction he would surely come to an end, in time. With a shrug, he set out along one of the walks.

He strolled easily along, his dagger loose in its sheath; his wounded foot hurt only a little, as he learned how to walk smoothly without putting his weight on the injured area. The fountains whispered on every side as he walked, and their light drew his gaze. He wound on among them, listening to their liquid voices, imagining that they were murmuring secrets to one another; he even thought, absurdly, that he could catch their words. Yes, he thought, there was a word, most certainly, a very clear word: "death." A soft chill ran through him, but he still listened, and again he heard the words of the spilling fountains. "Death," they said, "death," and "sleep." Sleep-yes, he thought, he had come far, he wanted to sleep...

He caught himself suddenly as a sharp pain ran up his leg; the thorn-wound has slammed into the low rim of one of the pools, and the sudden jolt brought him back to alertness. He looked about, wildly asking himself what he was doing. He had, he saw, been about, to fall headlong into a great silver-blue pool of light, where a towering spray of vivid wine-colored light danced madly. The sussuration of the fountains had mesmerized him; had he woken a moment later, it might have been too late, as he would have been well into the enchanted liquid that filled the pool.

He had no idea just what the liquid might do, and a powerful urge to dip his hand in it, perhaps to taste it, came over him, but he fought it off. That, he told himself forcefully, was the fountains' spell, making a final try for his mind and soul. He stepped back, well clear of the enticing, luminous water. Shaking his head to clear it of the mistiness left from his trance, he looked about him. It abruptly occurred to him that he had no idea how long or far he had wandered among the fountains while enthralled; he could see nothing that gave him a clue. Far to the right, between the flashing columns of liquid, he glimpsed carven ivory; and far to the left, he saw the polished

stone and tile of the palace. Behind him, though, the fountains seemed to go on forever; and before him was the same. Seeing no point in continuing farther through the forest of pools, and perhaps risking fresh ensorcellment, he turned left and made his way toward the citadel itself, with the intention of scaling it. At least from the roof he might be able to see some way in. As he walked, he realized he no longer heard mysterious whispers in the sound of the water; it seemed that by breaking his trance he had lost forever the influence of that soft, soft murmur. The renewed pain in his foot, he thought, might also help. His limp was back, worse than ever despite his best efforts. A few minutes' hobbling walk brought him to a narrow plaza between the watergarden and the palace, and to his astonishment he found himself before a pair of great gem-encrusted golden doors. He paused to stare up at them, dumbfounded; from a single step back, the portal had been invisible, the palace wall blank. Another illusion, of course-but which, he asked himself was real? Was the blank wall an illusion, or were these doors? Well, he answered himself boldly, there's one easy way to find out. He crossed the polished red marble of the plaza and mounted three steps to the portal. There, however, he had to halt, for he saw no latch or handle; not so much as a knocker marred the expanse of glittering gold, studded irregularly with rubies and sapphires. For that matter, he realized he could see no hinges; there were simply two huge golden panels, set flush in the stone wall, with only hairline cracks marking their edges.

He stepped back down to study the situation, but could see no solution. Returning to the top step, he pushed with all his strength against the metal, but there was no give or play whatsoever; he could not budge it. He then tried to get a grip on the projecting gems, to pull the door open, which likewise had no effect. At last, disgusted, all caution lost, in frustration he cried out an oath.

The doors trembled expectantly.

He froze. Nothing more happened. Hesitantly, he said, "Allah?" The doors quivered.

Cursing himself for not trying the obvious means for opening enchanted portals, described in any number of old tales, he cried out, "Open, door of al-Tir al-Abtan, in the name of Allah, the great, the merciful!"

Slowly and majestically, the golden portals swung inward, revealing a vast reception hall walled with jade, a vaulted ceiling almost out of sight above him, and a floor of green marble. It was bare of all furnishings, and all but empty; the only thing in all that great chamber was al-Tir al-Abtan's guardian.

Abu had his dagger out in a twinkling, upon seeing the dark, twisted form of the demon; it was indeed a ghoul, a loathsome twisted creature, a travesty of human shape with gray skin and long, greasy ropes of black hair. Fangs jutted up from its lower jaw; its eyes had no iris or pupil, but glowed a fiery yellow. Across one side of its face an oozing, leprous growth clung. The demon was naked, and grotesquely male. Although no taller than Abu al-Din, it must have weighed twice what he did, for it was as thick around as a barrel. It was armed with two-inch claws on every finger.

The thief could see the monster clearly, for a soft light emanated from the jade walls. Rather than be caught outside, he sprang inside and attacked first.

The ghoul fought like a mad dog, snarling and tearing at Abu without thought, its only aim to hurt and weaken its opponent. Abu, on the other

hand, concentrated on dodging, only occasionally thrusting at the creature with his knife. He realized quickly that his blade could not pierce the thick hide of the demon; but still he kept stabbing at it, hoping against all evidence that it had some vulnerable spot. Only when the blade snapped off did he recognize how badly he had erred. His only other equipment being his rope, he struggled to bring that into play; at last, he managed to break free for a moment and dash across the chamber. When the ghoul came after him it met a hard-flung iron hook, which, as Abu had hoped and aimed for, took him in the eye. The eerie golden orb burst with a blinding flash; the thief was staggered. An instant later the demon's roar of pain and hatred brought Abu back to full alertness, and taking quick advantage of his opponent's shock, Abu proceeded to swing the deadly hook into the other blazing eye. The flash was expected this time, and he recovered immediately from its effects. The demon roared again, horribly, sat still in the center of the chamber; then, in a burst of motion, he sprang at his tormenter. Abu dodged to the side, and the ghoul followed; blind as it now was, it could still track him by sound. Although he had improved his chances, Abu realized he was still facing a formidable enemy; he fled desperately, hampered by his injured foot and a dozen gashes from the demon's claws, trying to keep out of reach of the maddened monster. As he fled he continued to swing the iron hook at the ghoul, annoying it, but failing to wound it, until at last it grabbed the rope out of his hands, tearing the skin from his palms. The rope coiled and whipped about as he released it, and to the surprise of both combatants, it wrapped itself about the demon. Abu saw his chance; and snatching up the loose end, he began to run around the room, winding the cord about his assailant until the creature was unable to move. By the time the blinded monster had freed itself, Abu was out of range of even a demon's sensitive ears. Now, at last, the thief was loose in the palace, free to roam; prowling like a cat, he made his way through endless corridors and countless chambers, losing himself hopelessly in the maze of rooms.

He saw wonders like none he had dreamed of before. He saw peacocks that sang sweet songs, and glistening fish that swam in the air. He saw books written in blood, and scrolls of human skin. He saw fountains that burned, and found a fire that cooled his wounds; strange fragrances filled the air, and stranger sounds and musics. It seemed to him that he wandered for days among the magician's playthings.

And then, at last, he came upon the magician.

This was in a tower room, far above the body of the palace. The walls were polished crystal, yet black as death, and the stairs that he climbed to reach the chamber were lit from within, yet seemed as opaque as coal.

It was at the top of these stairs that he entered the wizard's laboratory, cluttered with ghastly talismans and dusty books. Amid the clutter stood a tall, thin old man-very tall, with white hair that flowed to his waist, and a silvery beard almost as long. He wore an absolutely plain black robe that shimmered eerily, and he was bent over one of the larger and dustier of the tomes.

Remembering the King's instructions, and seeing his intended victim thus absorbed, Abu crept up behind him, the heavy hilt of his broken dagger in his hand.

All strength abruptly ebbed from his limbs, and he collapsed helplessly, to lie unmoving on the floor.

The wizard finished reading the page, closed the book, and put it atop a pile nearby; then came and stood looking down at the paralyzed thief.

"You have disturbed me," the Most Profound Tir said. "This is not to be permitted. Further, I see in your eyes that all of Tahrir now wishes me ill, and that others will be sent after you. I will not have it." The dry, ancient voice seemed to fill everything, although Abu knew it wasn't really very loud. He tried to speak, but could not.

"What will I do with you, you ask?" Al-Tir al-Abtan stroked his beard. "I don't know. You do bear examination, having gotten this far into my palace, don't you? But I'm too busy to bother with you just now; you'll have to wait." He waved a hand, and Abu felt himself lifted by unseen hands. Then he was dropped roughly into a small trunk, and the lid fell closed. It was a very small trunk, and very cramped, but Abu al-Din had nothing to say about the accommodations, or anything else. He could not move, could not speak, and soon realized that he was not even breathing anymore-yet still he lived. He waited, unwillingly, for al-Tir al-Abtan to find the time to deal with him. Within a matter of hours, he felt certain that even death could be no worse than continued imprisonment. As he lay there, events went on without him. Outside the palace, in the city of Tahrir, Abu al-Din had been given up as lost, and as the Most Profound Tir had said, another was to be sent; but then, word came to the beggar King of strange stirring of the sea at the docks. Curious, he put off other matters to investigate and made his way to the waterfront, so that he was the first man in all Tahrir to be engulfed by the first great wave that washed over the city. In quick succession, a dozen immense waves broke across the stinking mass of Tahrir, washing it into the sea. The land itself sank, and by the time peace had returned to the churning ocean the city of Tahrir was utterly gone, lost forever, save for a single building, the Palace of al-Tir al-Abtan, which through all the tempest and flood remained untouched, as though a great glass wall encircled it. And when the seas stilled, the palace stood alone on a sheer-sided island, half beneath waves that broke harmlessly against that same invisible barrier, while inside, al-Tir al-Abtan worked on, paying scant attention to his handiwork. In his many long years of life and study he had gained knowledge and power of an incomprehensible order; the destruction of Tahrir had been no more to him than squashing a bug. Thus did the Island of al-Tir al-Abtan come into being, and thus it remained, for many, many years, until at last, one quiet night, al-Tir al-Abtan went away and took his palace with him. Now the seas wash lightly over the island when the tides are high, and gulls perch there calmly when the waves withdraw. All of Tahrir is long dead-save for Abu al-Din, who is still in that trunk, waiting for al-Tir al-Abtan to remember him.

About Lawrence Watt-Evans "The Palace of al-Tir and al-Abtan"

Lawrence Watt-Evans had-at the time of this story-a novel in print, and when this story appeared he had dropped out of college to concentrate on his writing, while his wife retained her job at IBM. He was unwilling to give his advice to young writers when asked-rare for writers, who are usually, words being their business, ready to give all sorts of unsolicited advice to anybody at the drop of a subordinate clause. When convinced that we meant it-our slant has always been almost as much to writers as to readers-he suggested that a beginning writer "write novels; first because they are easier to sell-" which is certainly true, the market for short stories being very tight. Second, he says, in a novel a few flaws won't show; not the case with a short-story." And this from the winner of a Hugo for a short story! That may be why he won it; in a very short story, every word counts, while in a novel you can waste a few.