

Weird Tales

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Cover by Lee Brown Coye

NOVELETTES

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Pete Larsen knew well enough that air personnel had often been forced to land on remote tropical islands. But he hadn't thought to ask if any of them were haunted.

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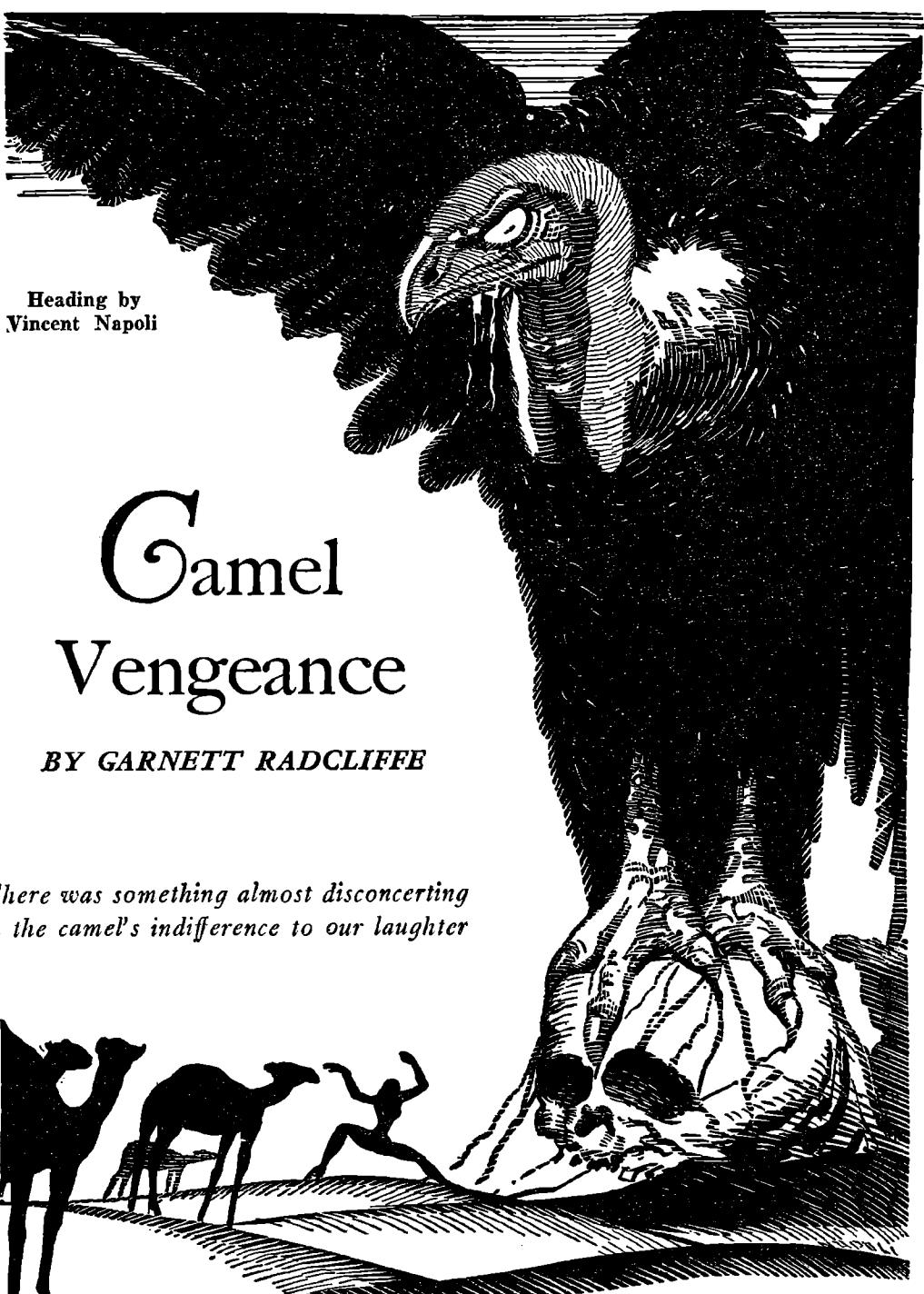
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Heading by
Vincent Napoli

Camel Vengeance

BY GARNETT RADCLIFFE

There was something almost disconcerting in the camel's indifference to our laughter

THIS thing happened in Aden. Aden is an interrogation mark at the foot of the Red Sea, a burning query to which an Arab would tell you that only a camel knows the answer.

Certainly only a camel could give the true explanation of this story. It concerns what happened to Rosemary Anderson, daughter of Tom Anderson of the Protectorate Police, when she visited the Barren Rocks.

We were prepared to welcome her. Tom, who would have made a good publicity agent, had led us to believe that his daughter was a sort of second Ruth Draper, an impersonator and comedienne, and in Aden laughter is as hard to come by as cold beer. I wasn't at the party Tom gave in honor of his daughter at the Union Club, but I got a report from young Howlette of the Sappers who was.

"Topping girl," he told me. "Not exactly what you'd call a beauty, but a good type. Dashed clever too. She did a sketch of an old Lancashire woman buying eggs that made me roar."

Against which I got another report from Bob Faulkner, a sailor who had had the bad luck to get himself spiked on our dun-colored peninsula.

"I can't stand that Anderson girl," he said. "Big hands and feet and laughs too much. Some people think she's funny, but I'm hanged if I do."

Remembering the Latin proverb "*quot homines tot sententiae*" I decided to reserve judgment until I had a chance of seeing the newcomer for myself.

The chance came at a hospital dance at Crater. Rosemary was a big bouncing girl with honey-colored hair and prominent teeth and an assured manner. "Jolly" is the word that describes her best. When I saw her she was being the life and soul of a crowd of lobster-faced subalterns in bush tunics.

"Camels?" I heard her cry, with a not very good imitation of the way people talk in Lancashire. "Nay, luv, ah don' like camels. They look like hearth-rugs or summat stuck on a couple o' clothes props. An', oh my, don' they smell fierce!"

The subalterns laughed, especially young Howlett. I took a gin and tonic to a man who might give me a tip for the next Khormaksar races. And the sudden laughter, loud and prolonged, drew my attention again to Miss Anderson, and after a moment I began to laugh myself.

Something had inspired her to start imitating a camel. As a rule imitations of the sort made me yawn, but she was being really funny.

Evidently she possessed a keener observation and a greater power of mimicry than I'd have given her credit for. And she had been assisted by Nature for giving this particular impersonation in that she had a long neck, prominent teeth and a long loose-jointed body.

Nor did she mind making herself look ridiculous in a good cause. With her back humped and her extended head scything from side to side she galumphed stiff-legged round the room emitting the moaning, grunting sounds suggestive of outraged dignity that was peculiar to the camel.

To make people laugh in Aden is an accomplishment. She succeeded as I'd never known anyone succeed before. We forgot our prickly heat, irritability and depression due to excessive humid heat and laughed and laughed. The band stopped, the dancers came crowding in to watch, and even the most senior and liverish amongst us forgot their dignity and applauded like schoolboys at a pantomime.

She had to do her impromptu act again and again. When duty called me away at one o'clock in the morning my memory was of her showing us how a camel kneels to be loaded; it made me laugh all the way up the Khormaksar road where the salt pans and the windmills which fill them look like frozen Dutch landscapes transplanted to the desert.

That night I had witnessed the birth of a star. But its waxing and steady ascent in the Aden social firmament I was not privileged to witness since official duty had sent me to Socotra for a spell.

On the island of dragon-blood trees, wild donkeys and semi-starvation there were no camels to remind me of Rosemary. Memory of the evening at the Crater hospital had passed from my mind when an attack of malaria caused me to return sweating, shivering and miserable in an overcrowded Dakota that landed me on the Khormaksar flying field.

A LITTLE later, when I was lying convalescent on the veranda of the new R. A. F. hospital overlooking Post Office bay, Rob Faulkner visited me with grapes

and gossip. Like most naval officers when ashore he is an inveterate gossip.

"Rosemary Anderson's got herself engaged to young Howlett," he told me after other things had been discussed. "Well, she's not exactly my cup of tea, but they seem to suit each other. Anyway, his married life shouldn't be dull. That girl's a genius in her own line. Ever seen her camel impersonations? It's terrific. About the funniest thing that's ever happened in Aden. She goes like this—"

He popped a grape into his mouth, rose from his chair and began to imitate Rosemary imitating a camel. That was my first intimation of how great was her success for he could have employed no sincerer flattery.

While I laughed a passing sister, evidently another Rosemary fan, put down what she was carrying and began to vie with Rob in performing camel antics. Then a couple of walking cases in pajamas joined in. She had started one of those vogues that sometimes attack communities like infectious diseases.

What heightened our amusement was the fact that a string of the genuine article chanced to be passing along the road beneath the veranda. The sister leaned over the balcony like Juliet and made camel noises. Rob said, "Watch out sister, they'll spit in your eye," but his warning was unnecessary. Had we been monkeys mocking from a tree-top the great brown brutes could not have ignored us more completely. Heavy and supercilious with lowered eyelids they stalked past us like kings disdainful of the mob. I felt foolish, perhaps we all felt a little foolish after they had passed. There had been something very disconcerting in their indifference to our laughter.

BY THE time I was fit enough to leave hospital Rosemary and her camel turn had become the talk of Aden. Another cause for merriment was that she had developed an ambition to become a camel rider, an ambition the camels themselves seemed determined to thwart. Evidently camels were allergic to her. Her appearance in the camel lines was enough to cause a sort of riot. They squealed and gurgled and refused to

kneel and indulged in even more unpleasant tricks when she went near. But Rosemary was not daunted. Indeed, I think she actually enjoyed teasing the ungainly brutes she could mimic so brilliantly.

I witnessed one such episode. It was in the main street of Mauri, the straggling Arab village between Steamer and Crater. On this occasion it almost seemed as if it was the camel that was intent on making Rosemary look ridiculous. It had allowed her to mount pillion behind young Howlett who could ride like a Bedouin, and now in the center of the busiest street in Aden it was "playing up."

It had turned itself broadside to the stream of traffic, thus effectively blocking the street. And in front of an ever increasing audience of natives, bullock carts, goats, taxis and children it was going through a camel's full repertoire of hate. Bellowing and bubbling with its head thrust forward like a snake's it looked like some absurd prehistoric monster exhibiting its helpless riders before the guffawing crowd.

I was in a small van driven by an eighteen-year-old Arab called Hassein Baksh Yaffei. To get past was impossible so we were perforce witnesses to Howlett's humiliation. I say Howlett's because Rosemary didn't seem to care. Not in the least frightened she gurgled back at the furious brute in what she called "camel-ese."

"Ooh-wah, nasty . . . You're a wah-wah-ooh-wah great smelly lump of stupidity . . . Pick oop the stoomps, Sam. Hump, an' let's get weavin' . . . Less of the wah-wah-wah from you, old fuzzy face!"

The camel's reply was a sudden lurch that deposited them both on the road. It wheeled then, but its obvious intention of savaging Rosemary was forestalled by an *askarri* of the Levies who grabbed its nose cord just in time.

I took them to the club that was their destination in the van. On the way both Howlett and myself tried to scold Rosemary. Camels, we warned her, were more intelligent than they appeared and vindictive brutes with long memories. She would be well-advised, we told her, to leave them alone.

She laughed at us.

"Great gawky daddy-long-legs," she scoffed. "I'm going to ride one before I leave Aden or die."

I think that episode in Mauri rankled. A few days later she made what was to be her last public appearance as a camel impersonator in the Khormaksar open-air cinema. It was a spiteful performance and extraordinarily funny. The evening was a riot. We held our sides when she lolloped round the stage after the fashion of a hobbled camel. Like a great cartoonist she must have made a careful study of her subject for there was not a trick or mannerism nor an inflection of a grunt that was not included in her repertoire.

At last she was too exhausted to continue. I observed her when she was making her final bow. She'd already become Adenised in that she had gone thinner and had patches of prickly heat on her face and arms. She looked strung-up and nervy and there was almost feverish glitter of excitement in her eyes.

"Oob-wab! . . . Ooob-wab!" It might have been a camel that bubbled at us across the footlights. "I'm off to feed my hump, so oob-wab-oob!"

The thing was infectious. We yelled back "oob-wab-oob!" so that the cinema sounded like the camel-lines sound when the syces are bringing round the feed.

I THINK Rosemary's success plus the Aden climate must have unbalanced her a little. Perhaps she had camels on the brain. For a few evenings later she rode alone on her pony to the tents of the Bedouin Legion above Sheikh Othman and sought out the head syce who was in charge of the racing camels loaned to the Legion by the Sultan of Rdiyan.

Although the syce swears otherwise I suspect money changed hands. However it was, Rosemary got her wish. He brought out Shaitan whom the Arabs called "*Gamel El Awal*" (Camel No. 1). He was a vast brute with a coat like dirty cream and a face like an Assyrian King.

Shaitan was old and well-trained. Unlike her previous mounts he made no protest

when he saw Rosemary. On the evidence of the syce he knelt as meekly as an ass for her to mount.

When she was in the saddle the syce told Shaitan to rise and led him by the nose cord on to the Maidan beyond the wire.

Three times the syce led him in a circle. Then he ran so that Shaitan had to trot. Rosemary was enchanted. She tapped Shaitan on the neck with her switch and called him some silly name.

At the sound Shaitan seemed suddenly to go mad. He screamed and jerked the cord from the unsuspecting hands of the syce. Next instant the great bactrian shot off like a thunderbolt, galloping at devastating speed across the boulder-strewn maidan. With extended neck and open mouth he must have looked like some horrific dragon bearing away its victim.

The syce heard her scream as if, to quote his own words, she had glimpsed the Gates of Hell. He shouted to her to fling herself off, but either she didn't understand or was too frightened. And then the monstrous, striding apparition had vanished in the wilderness of scrub and sand dunes.

There was consternation when the news reached Steamer. I saw Tom Anderson in the Union Club looking as white as paper.

"We must find her as soon as possible," he said. "And you fellows must help."

Of course we were all game. There are roving Bedouin in the country above Aden who would cut your throat for sixpence. Had she been thrown she might have sustained concussion or a broken leg. Again, the camel might have savaged her.

There was a wide area to search. My local knowledge suggested that Shaitan might have headed for the maidan bordering the Le Kij road when he would find pasture and roving females of his own species. I went in that direction in the Hillman van, and as usual Hassein Baksh Yaffei was my driver.

Young Howlett had had the same idea. He'd gone on foot taking with him a fox terrier called Neb he himself had given to Rosemary. But Neb had failed to pick up any scent and Howlett was looking white

and drawn with fatigue for he'd been running when I encountered him.

"Ten to one she's walking back this minute," I said to comfort him. "Hop in at the back and we'll see if we can meet her."

Our search of the particular stretch of maidan proved fruitless. Beyond were hills too rugged for even a camel so we returned to the Sheikh Othman road.

Here we halted to take further counsel. While we stood there arguing night swooped on Aden like a raven. Neb struggled and whined in Howlett's arms. The harbor lights far below suddenly shone forth and the broad red forehead of the moon peeped above Sham-Sham's right shoulder.

The temperature had dropped at least four degrees. By chance we had stopped close to the Legion camel lines and we could hear them moaning and snarling in the darkness. Hassein Baksh cocked his ear to the sound and looked puzzled.

"The camels are upset tonight," he said. "Hearken to them, sahib! Maybe they are missing Shaitan!"

Even to my experienced ear the camels seemed unusually loquacious for that hour. The voices reminded me of Rosemary, and I think they did Howlett too. He spoke rather desperately:

"She's scared of the dark. . . . She's scared of a lot of things in Aden. . . . Oh, damn those camels!"

We drove up through the flaring Sheikh Othman bazaar, past the barrier and so to the Le Hej caravan route which points itself to the heart of Saudi Arabia. Other search parties had also headed that way. People were shouting at intervals and firing off Very lights as they worked like beaters across the plain in the direction of Wadi Kebir.

If she were on that side of the road they'd be safe to find her. We turned right where the sand was firm enough to bear our tires and bumped slowly across the maidan, the headlamps showing us boulders and clumps of shrub. At last we glimpsed the lights of a Somali village and heard a distant barking of dogs.

Shaitan would have been unlikely to have gone near the village. We circled away and

as we did so a flock of riderless camels passed like fantastic shadows in the moonlight and vanished behind a sand dune. Without orders Hassein stopped the truck.

I got out and Howlett joined me. Hassein spoke from his place at the wheel, and his voice told me he was frightened.

"We had better return to the road, sahib. This is an evil spot haunted by the ghosts of camels. Does the sahib not perceive anything?"

The sahib did—both sahibs did. A faint but horribly distinct scent of carrion had reached us. And I realized then exactly where we were. Curiosity on my first arrival in Aden had caused me to visit the place before.

Somewhere in front of us, in a depression hidden among the sand-dunes, was the local madafin eg gemel or camel cemetery, a horrible place where vultures and kites gorged on the unburied carcasses and pariahs had tugs of war for grisly spoils.

SUDDENLY the fox terrier wriggled out of Howlett's grasp and began running. Deaf to our shouts he made a cast on the direction of the madafin, then he set his nose to the ground and started running on what was evidently a trail. There was nothing to be done save to follow. We returned to the truck and drove slowly behind what Hassein called the "little unclean one" as he sniffed and whined among the stones and shrubs.

Then the sand grew darker, the stench increased and I knew we were entering the madafin. Our lamps showed us the clean-picked skeletons of camels, their extended necks looking like the vertebrae of weird fish. A pariah with something in its mouth fled from our lights, and great vultures like ghoulish sentries roosted among the rocks.

Hassein gave a cry. On the sand dunes, silhouetted like black rocks against the stars, there were camels. The Arab pointed and his voice was a moan of fear.

"Behold Shaitan himself and his friends! What are they watching? Allah be merciful! Allah guard us from this evil. . . ."

Then Howlett shouted something and leapt from the truck. A huge vulture was

weaving its uncouth dance before the motionless camels. It was flopping and hopping in circles on the bone-littered sand. Then I too yelled and sprang from the truck.

What we saw was no vulture. Rosemary in her white shirt and jodphurs was dancing and hopping among the carrion. The mimicry of a vulture was horribly exact. She uttered croaking sounds as she hopped and flapped her arms.

For an instant we were too horrified to approach. But Rosemary had a champion who knew no fear. It was Neb who dashed in fury at the camels. At his furious barking the evil spell was broken. They wheeled and fled like ungainly ghosts with the little dog raging at their heels. . . .

Rosemary paid us no attention. She was deathly white, her eyes were staring and expressionless and her mouth down-drawn in a terrible parody of a smile. She wished to go on dancing. When we took her arms and tried to lead her to the truck she waved her arms like wings and made motions with her head as if she were trying to pick our hands.

"Concussion," I told Howlett who looked as if he might faint. "Shaitan threw her and the shock has sent her a bit silly. . . . All right Rosemary . . . take it easy old girl."

She fought us like the vulture she imagined herself to be. And as we struggled I seemed to hear a devilish sound as if camels were laughing in the darkness.

THOSE are the facts. You can draw from them any inference you choose. The inner truth of the matter will never be known until God has unveiled the mystery of the relationship between man and the animal creation.

Anyway, Rosemary is now fully recovered and is living happily in England with young Howlett as her husband. The doctors claim it was their electric shock treatment restored her sanity, but I think most of the credit should go to Neb who never left her by day or night. For though you may query the possibility of camels possessing a malign influence, you cannot gainsay that the love of a dog may raise a stricken human soul upwards from the pit.
