

Weird Tales

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**MONSTERS
OF THE
PIT**
by
Paul S. Powers

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Weird Tales

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MONSTERS OF THE PIT

by
Paul S.
Powers



HOW did I lose my left arm? Well, gentlemen, I have felt that question coming for a long time, and to tell the truth about the matter, I rather dreaded it. For, as well as I have grown to know you during these lonesome nights at the club, I never thought the time would come when I could unburden my mind. I don't expect that you will believe me, either you, Bronson, or Roberts, here. I tried to tell the story once before, to a French doctor at Port Said. He laughed at me first, and thought me insane afterwards. I won't blame you for doing the same. Sometimes I hardly believe the story myself. It seems more like a nightmare than a reality. But here's the proof, gentlemen—this poor stump that once was a fairly serviceable left arm. It looks like a neat surgical operation, doesn't it? But it took my wife three hacks to get it off.

Waiter! Bring the vermouth! There, thank you. You look startled, gentlemen. Perhaps you'd better have a drop of the wine to take the chill of the London fog from your bones. Beastly night, outside. No, I wasn't joking, Bronson, and if you'll be so good as to hand me a cigarette, I'll tell the tale—spin the yarn, as you Americans put it. You won't believe

the story, but that makes little difference. I think there is a little saying in your country: "If you believe it, it's true."

It happened four years ago when I was down at Port Said with the engineering company. I was a single man, then, with not a thought in the world other than to take my good money while I could get it, and to get out when there was no more to be had. It was good pay, but rotten work in a rottener country. The town wasn't bad for a headquarters, but it was the trips into the interior that broke us down—from the chief engineer to Tubbs, the youngest apprentice. A year or two and the average man was done, in that country. I saw three white men sent back to the coast on litters, and two more went back in a more gruesome condition. When it wasn't the fever it was the insects, and usually it was both. The snakes and the flies weren't so bad, for a man can kill them, or some of them, but I'll never forget the breath of those awful swamps nor the touch of those ungodly creeping things that were bound to be in your boots in the morning and on your cot at night.

Well, it was half way across the nigger country that stretches between the company offices and Suakin. There

were seven of us white men and a party of blacks. One of the black boys, however, I really grew to like and trust. He knew the country, the desert, and the jungle; and he knew mules. He was in charge of the string we had with us. Kali was this remarkable fellow's name, and I suppose I am the only one who now remembers it.

Can you imagine seeing a beautiful English girl in a filthy native town in the depths of Africa? I couldn't either, until I saw her. Gad! She was white, and young! When I met her in that market place, with a basket on her arm and dressed like a nun, I got the biggest thrill of my life. She was about eighteen, and though I didn't see the beauty of her at the time, I was shocked beyond words. I learned afterward that I was the first Englishman she had ever seen, with the exception of her father—but more of that later. Just that glimpse was all I had, that day, but it was enough to set me thinking.

THE chief only laughed when I reached the camp with the news, but the chief was a steady old blighter with grandchildren in South-sea, so I didn't wonder. It was the same when I told the other men—they thought I had been drinking. But it was true, and of course I asked Kali. "Why, that is the daughter of the dread father, the mad white man," he winked over the cigarette I had given him. "But no—all white men are mad."

"And who," I asked, "is this white man?"

"A learned man," grinned Kali, "but mad, all the same. He was here when my father was as I am, and even then he was mad. If he was not mad, would he creep in the swamps and in the sand, even as the insects?"

"But how does he live?"

"Ah, he has gold—English gold. Two times, sometimes three times a year, he goes to the coast and brings

back all manner of strange things. Wanaki, one of his blacks, once told me that he brought back devils in tiny bottles, from the English ships. To uncork the bottles means death—a terrible swelling death. Wanaki told of his devils and how a black boy died even as cattle die from the cobra. But there was no snake—there was only a white powder."

"Does the girl go with him on his trips to Port Said?"

"If she had, Wanaki would have told me. The girl child is made to stay with the black women. The white man is mad, and if you take the advice of Kali you will forget the white child woman in the long black dress."

Kali looked very wise indeed, and I believe he wanted another cigarette. I cursed him sourly and left him to his mules.

The sight of the woman had set something loose within me. You know well how it is in the wilderness, and it had been long weeks since we had left Port Said. To be sure, there were women there—of a kind. I wanted to know this girl, at least to learn something of her history. Kali's gossip had aroused my curiosity, though I did not believe him. Kali's great sin was his love for talk and his hatred for bare facts. But I vowed to see the girl again.

I'll pass over briefly the days that followed. The very afternoon following my talk with Kali I saw her again, but only a glimpse and she was gone. Then several days passed, and during them I learned more about the girl and her father. His name was Denham, a doctor, it appeared, with several letters tacked after his name—a scientist. Those were all the facts I could gather, and what he was doing and had been doing the past twenty years was a mystery. Collecting bugs? Possibly. But Kali and the blacks swore that it was more than that—by the burial pits of their fathers it was more than that. He was a devil-devil doctor, and made the

milk of the cows turn sour. He was a man-witch who poisoned the swamps, and talked with the spiders at evil hours of the night. He was also a number of other undesirable things, according to the superstitious Kali, who continued to divulge more or less valuable information over my cigarettes.

Then came the day when I met the girl face to face. And that day I learned more than ever before, though what I heard scarcely satisfied me.

THE girl was timid, and though she permitted me to walk with her a short distance, I left her more disturbed than before. Yes, she said, she was English, though born in Africa. She had never seen England, having been no farther than Port Said, and then only once, when a mere baby. Her mother? She did not remember her mother, and she had never heard the English tongue spoken except by her father. This was practically all she told me, but it made me long to hear more.

On that short walk with her I learned several important details, not the least important of which was the fact that she was even prettier than I had at first supposed. And she had been well educated—the professor evidently was an excellent teacher—and she had mentioned books, many books. The next morning I was waiting in the market place.

She came. It was more than I had hoped. Why bore you with details, gentlemen? I met her again and again, and grew to know her better than myself. Yes, I was in love, and beyond that there's no explanation needed, I'm sure.

We talked of many things during that first short week of our acquaintance, and on one subject only was she elusive: her father. Of her father only, she would not speak. When I spoke of him she would turn away with a look on her face much akin to fear. But perhaps I was mistaken.

As we grew more intimate it grew upon me that her father, even if he was the dreadful being Kali had made him out to be, was at least a wonderful scholar. I could read it in this child. She was wonderful. In most respects she astounded me with her learning, and then at other times she would show an ignorance that was pathetic. The man she called father had molded her mind to suit his will, but there is that something about a woman's mind, gentlemen, that no earthly cunning can twist from its course. I began to read it in her eyes that she cared for me more than her innocence knew. I haven't told you her name. It was Irene Denham.

"I would like very much to meet your father," I ventured, one evening. "Doesn't he know that you are meeting me here?"

She hesitated.

"I have told him of you, Scott," she admitted. "And—well, he doesn't exactly approve. Of course it's because he doesn't know you," she added, hastily, "but when I suggested that you visit us at our home on the veldt, he was very angry. Father is like that—sometimes I think he hates all white men. I think it's because he's so wrapped up in his work, the work he has been carrying on for twenty years. But tomorrow, Scott, if you will come—"

I shook my head.

"Not if he disapproves of it," I began, and then I had a sudden thought. I would go, and moreover, I would come to an understanding with this man. Surely I had the right, at least, for I was determined to take Irene back to England with me. There was no other course open—I would see Professor Denham, and see him the very next day. I told the girl of my plans—and, well, gentlemen, I won't go into details—but she accepted them. I would meet her in the dirty little market place the next morning, we agreed, and would accompany her home.

I FOUND Kali very much worried that night, and when I pressed him for further information, and told him that I was planning to visit Professor Denham the next day, he told me bluntly that I would soon die.

"Nonsense, Kali," I laughed. "Why, I expect to find a respectable old naturalist and a fine collection of ants and butterflies. He's harmless. In my country no one is ever frightened at their doings. He's what is called a scientist, Kali."

"One of the black fellah boys from beyond the village told me to watch my mules," answered Kali. "He told me, also, that the white witch-man has been stealing his cattle. What does he do with the cattle? He takes them into dark pits within his great stone house. Tell me, do butterflies eat cattle?"

I was getting very angry, and could have taken the impudent black scoundrel by the throat with pleasure.

"Hold your tongue!" I commanded, but when I left his hut Kali was smoking one of my cigarettes, all the same. This really was getting interesting. On the morrow, I told myself, I would know just how much Kali had lied. At the time I put the whole story down as the product of Kali's vivid, if not convincing, creative imagination. I was in love. The next morning, the morning, I varnished my boots carefully, and put on my best khaki breeches. I would have given a small fortune for the white linen ones of the chief engineer, but I didn't dare ask him for them. It was hard enough to get away for the day.

IRENE was at our rendezvous, and I received the thrill of my life when I saw that she had discarded her nun-like dress for one more fitting to the occasion. It seemed to me to be rather a makeshift affair, but it became her—it brought out beauty that I had not thought her to possess. She was a man's woman, was Irene!

"I don't know why, dear, but I dread the meeting between you and father," she murmured.

We had left the village and were climbing a baking sand dune.

"It won't be so bad," I said, cheerfully. "My education hasn't been along the same lines as your father's, and perhaps he won't be interested in me, yet perhaps we shall have some things in common. A white man, you know, is a white man, and even Africa can't change him. I'll wager you that the first question he asks me is, 'Have you an old *London Times* with you?'"

"White men have been near the village before," insisted the girl. "Never has he admitted them to our home, although one was a scientist like him—an explorer. I believe he hates all men—all mankind. True, he finally gave permission to bring you, but I'm afraid—"

"Does he love—you?" I asked.

"I don't know. There was a time when I was sure he did, just as there were times when he would bring flowers from our garden and put them upon my mother's grave, but for many years he has been changed. He hates the world—he plans to destroy—"

She did not finish the sentence, but stopped as if a cold hand had been laid across her red lips. She paled, and I saw that she was trembling. When I pressed her for an explanation, she changed the subject with a frightened, pathetic smile. From that moment on I felt that a chill had crept down from the dunes like a breath from the swamps. We walked on in silence.

"There!" she said, when we had reached the top of a little hillock, "There is—home."

Home! So this was her home! A melancholy house of stone, crumbling like an ancient ruin. It seemed strangely out of place here in this desolation. It belonged to Carthage, or perhaps to some long dead city.

And this child lived here! I shuddered, even though the heat was flickering in waves across the distant veldt.

Her steps became slower, as we approached, and she seemed to be laboring under a clutching fear. I remember that the few cheerful and rather idiotic remarks I made fell flat, and truly I was in no mood for jesting.

As we neared the house I could see half a dozen black slaves working about the *kraal*, but I could see no sign of life within the house. It was fearfully hot, and far, far to the east I thought I could make out the distant line of the sea, but I knew it was a mirage.

WELL, I met Dr. Denham. We had entered the coolness of the hallway, and as I stood wondering what fashion of man it was who had furnished this dreary place so well, I saw a smiling face peering at us from beyond the draperies.

"Mr. Scott, I presume?"

A soft voice, and it fitted the man. In the semi-darkness which was the nearest approach to comfort in sweltering British East Africa, I saw Irene's father. A man of fifty, perhaps, smooth-shaven and neatly dressed in white. The mouth under his rather hooked nose was curved into a smile, and yet, somehow, I felt chilled. No smile of welcome that! Not that there was anything alarming about the doctor's appearance, for he was nearly as I had pictured him, with his scholarly spectacles and abstracted manner. A naturalist and scientist, he looked his part. I bowed.

"I am very glad to know you, Professor Denham," I said, and extended my hand.

That handclasp was like ice! Denham's skin was repulsively cold and moist, like that of a bloated leech. I shuddered, and looked at the man closely.

The eyes! The heavy lenses of his glasses failed to utterly conceal the serpentine power of those greenish eyes. They were at once the eyes of a hypnotist and snake charmer. Though the professor was smiling with his thin lips, the eyes remained icy and the skin across his lofty brows was wrinkled into a frown. I remember that he made a few commonplace remarks and invited me inside. Dinner, he said, would soon be served. He was happy to have an Englishman for his guest. Yes, it was lonely here, but he was fond of loneliness. All the time he was talking I could not keep my eyes from his face. There was some mystery here—some strange secret in this man's life. And Irene knew of it, for I remembered that little slip she had made while we were crossing the sands. She was worried now, and she was watching her father with mingled fear and apprehension, if I read aright.

At dinner, which was served by a good-looking black, the professor talked of many things. Did I like the country? When did I expect to return to Cairo and Port Said? He asked many questions, and for the first time since I met him I felt at ease. Perhaps I had been mistaken, after all. First impressions do not always furnish one with a character guide. I warmed up, and we talked until late afternoon, over our wine. I was just about to come to the point, and tell him the real reason for my journey there, when he asked me to look at his specimens.

"Something that you'll find interesting, Mr. Scott, I'm sure," he smiled. "I doubt if you've ever seen anything like them. It has taken years for me to perfect my plans, and it is only recently that I have had any success. Do you know anything of bacteriology?"

"Very little," I confessed. "From what your daughter told me I thought your experiments were confined to insects. I did not know that bacteriol-

ogy, too, was a hobby of yours, doctor."

He eyed me sharply.

"It's more than a hobby," he said, "as you will soon see. As for insects, well, you will see my insects—later."

I felt much like telling him that he need not go to that trouble. Creeping things had always horrified me, and I had seen quite enough of them since I had been working in Africa. However, it was my plan to keep him in a good humor until we could reach an understanding, so I followed him into a distant portion of the great house.

"As far as bacteria are concerned," I told him, "I haven't even as much as peeped into a microscope."

Professor Denham laughed.

"Microscope!" he leered. "You won't need a magnifying glass to see my collection!"

Was the man mad? I felt a chill creep over me.

WE HAD reached a sort of laboratory, and the professor withdrew a cloth from a glass case. I looked over his shoulder, then, and received one of the shocks of my life. What were these horribly squirming things? Not insects, for never in my dreams had I pictured things like these! They were writhing like maggots in a substance that appeared to be a sticky gelatin. Some of them resembled scorpions, but most of them were rod-shaped things the size of my little finger. They were moving, moving—never still.

"What—what are they?" I stammered in an awed voice.

"Bacilli," chuckled the doctor.

"You mean germs—of disease?" I asked, horrified.

"Exactly! What do you think of my work? I have multiplied them a million times, in size. Some of those organisms literally breathe death. It has taken me twenty years to find the secret, and do you know what it means? I am lord of the world!"

It was devilish, and I longed to get out of the room. This man was mad, surely, yet here was the hideous proof before me.

"There they are," went on the scientist, with a horrible smile. "There they are till I am ready to use them, safe in the glass case and in a culture medium of agar agar."

I wiped the cold sweat from my face, and told him that I had seen quite enough and was ready to leave.

"Not until you have seen the most interesting specimens in my exhibit of insect life," smiled the professor. "I wouldn't have you miss that, for worlds."

I wanted to tell him that I wouldn't see another sight like those writhing things in his laboratory for worlds, either, but I followed him from the room and into a corridor. A huge black was waiting for us there.

"Well, Sahem?" asked the professor, in a harsh metallic voice.

The black giant showed his teeth in a look of anxiety.

"The slaves, master," he muttered.

"They threaten to fly. They are afraid, and even the cattle whip cannot make them stay longer. Some of them will talk, unless—"

The doctor whipped a revolver from his blouse and handed it to the great negro.

"Tell them that I will have them thrown into the great pit," he snarled, "if they breathe a word! Kill them, Sahem, if they do not obey; and as for yourself, if you make one slip, the black pit will yawn for your carcass also!"

The slave's face twitched with fear, and it was nearly livid when he bowed to the ground and backed out of the dank passage on his hands and knees. Before I had time to recover from my astonishment a terrible sound echoed at my feet. It was an agonized belch, ending in a gurgling wail, and it seemed to come from a cavern under the house. The hair tightened on my scalp at that fearful sound—the death

sound of some animal in fear and pain. For a moment I heard it and then it died suddenly away into silence.

"My God!" I whispered, "what was that?"

"I fancy," smiled the professor, cheerfully, "that it was an ox."

Kali's weird tale flashed through my head. Perhaps the talkative black man had not lied so much, after all. There was a deeper mystery here than I had at first imagined, and for the moment my curiosity was stronger than my dread. While I followed the bobbing form of the scientist up the passage, I turned over in my mind all I had seen and heard. Again I seemed to see those horrible squirming things in the glass case, and once more I seemed to hear that awful wail. An ox! How long would this distorted nightmare last?

"Now, if you'll be so good," murmured the professor, "we will look over my collection of insects."

HE HAD reached a trap-door and was tugging at the rope that raised it. It suddenly yawned open and I saw the first steps of a staircase leading somewhere down into the dark.

"We'll just leave the door open, so we can see," said the scientist, and he led the way cautiously down the wooden steps. With some misgiving I followed, keeping close to his back. The death cry of the ox still rang in my ears and I determined not to lose sight of my guide. Three steps, then four, then five. At that moment I heard steps on the passage above, and a second later saw Irene's white face framed in the square opening at my head.

"Oh, Scott," she whispered. "Come back—come back!"

Even as the words left her lips I saw a great black hand placed over her mouth, and caught a glimpse of

the giant negro, his face distorted by a scowl of rage and fury. I leaped up the steps, and as I did so, down came the trap with a bang and I found myself scuffling in the dark with the professor.

I fought furiously, and was overpowering the wiry little fiend, when I felt myself hanging over the edge of a black void. Something seemed to whirl me closer and then I fell, with the doctor's insane laugh ringing in my ears.

Something strangely yielding broke my fall, something that felt like a suspended mass of silken rope. For a moment I was held there, and as the trap-door was opened above me, I saw the face of the professor looking down at me from above. So this was the pit! I struggled, and tried to wrench myself free from the tangling bands that bound me, for Irene's suppressed cry still echoed in my brain. In vain I tried to tear myself loose, and then, as my eyes grew accustomed to the faint light, I ceased. The silken strands that grasped my arms and legs were as large around as my thumb, and held me like so much steel. The professor was leaning over the edge of the pit. He was speaking, and his voice was quivering with rage.

"Fool! Miserable fool!" he mocked. "So you sought to steal my daughter, did you? And she the future princess of the world! I know your kind, and now I can watch you die. Soon you will see my collection of *insects!*"

And then in the distant corner I could see a huge pair of phosphorescent eyes staring at me through the gloom—then another pair and another! They seemed to appear as if by magic from some dark recess within the pit. Then I saw what covered the floor of the place! Bones! Bones of cattle and of sheep! And in the maze of ropy threads about me hung the carcass of a great ox! I was being held in nothing less than the web of a monstrous spider!

I SCREAMED, and as an echo to the scream I heard the throaty laugh of the demented man in the gallery. *Insects!* God! Great bloated spiders, foul and gigantic, were watching me from their awful lairs! Again I struggled to wrench myself away, but I fell exhausted. Then I saw the hideous monsters begin slowly to advance, and I felt the web tremble as if something of great weight was gliding upon it.

Above me and to the right was one of the ghastly spiders. I saw its multiple eyes watching me as it paused. Fangs, shining like polished ebony, protruded beneath those terrible eyes, and when I saw the thing perched on the great web ready to pounce upon me, I cried out in horror. The web shook again, and I closed my eyes and waited for the dreadful impact. Even now, gentlemen, the sight of a fly buzzing his wings in a spider's web makes me sick and weak. Why I did not faint then, I don't know. Perhaps I was too terror-stricken.

I believe the monster would have leaped at that instant had it not been for a cry on the other wall of the pit. At the sound I began to hope again. It was Irene.

She was descending by a ladder, under a large trap on the other side, doubtless the one through which the ox had been cast. In her hand was an ax.

"Leave me!" I shouted, sick with fear for her safety. "You cannot save me! Back! Back!"

But she came, and I saw the terrible thing above me turn on its great legs, and watch her. At that second I heard a yell of fury from the professor. He was descending a rope ladder on the other side of the pit, and was foaming with rage.

The great spider had faced me again, and I could feel its legs rasp against the web that held me. I saw that the monster was covered with hair, like a huge bear, though no bear was ever so disgustingly sickening as

this dreadful thing. I felt like a helpless fish about to be seized by a bloated octopus. Yet once again it hesitated, as if not knowing whether to turn on Irene or the professor.

Irene reached me first, and her ax whistled through the air at my feet as she cut me loose from the tenacious web. As she did so the hideous monster leaped at her! Like a steel trap and with terrible ferocity, the spider sprang, only to meet Irene's ax.

The keen edge of the tool sank into its horrible flesh. I wrenched the weapon from Irene's hand and finished the awful thing—saw it writhe out its death struggle, entangled by its own web. I struck again and again, and then threw aside the ax with a feeling of nausea and disgust. Irene clung to me and sobbed.

"Quick!" I cried, as I tore my eyes away from the throes of the monster I had killed. "Your father—look!"

The unfortunate professor was pinned under the dreadful body of another spider. It had sprung upon him while I was occupied with my own troubles.

Seizing the ax, I dashed toward him, taking care to avoid the treacherous web. I struck at the insect of hell with all my strength, and it turned upon me savagely. I saw those awful fangs poised above me as I struck again upward with the ax. My blow landed squarely, but it was too late to avoid the knifelike poison tubes. Something swept into my left hand like a razor, just as the dying and distended body of the spider bore me to the ground. I felt a fetid, cold breath on my neck and something flabby and soft seemed to encircle my chest. For a moment I lost consciousness.

The next thing I remembered was the sense of a great weight being removed from my body. I groaned, and sat upright. Irene helped me to my feet, and she was calm, though the dead body of the professor lay not

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Monsters of the Pit

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three feet away. I had been too late, and the spider had accomplished his deadly work. The scientist had been killed by the product of his own insane cunning.

We made good our escape, and it was well, for if another spider—well, I had reached the limit of my sanity.

In the passageway, Irene caught a glimpse of my hand for the first time.

“Scott!” she screamed. “Look!”

My hand was enormously swollen, and even as I watched I could see a blue discoloration working its way toward my elbow. In the excitement I had forgotten the slash from the keen fangs of the spider. I was as good as doomed.

Irene still held the ax, and as I stood there, shaking like a leaf, she raised her eyes in a prayer for courage. I read the answer in her face, and without being told I laid down my swollen arm.

WELL, gentlemen, it took her three hacks to get it off. How the blood was stanchd I don't know, for the next thing I remember was being jolted along in an ox-cart, bound for the nearest surgeon. A nigger was driving, and I was feeling fine. My head was pillowed in Irene's lap. I looked back, then, and saw a red glow against the evening sky. The slaves had fired the place, and fled. From what I have been able to learn, the spiders died in the ruins, for I've never seen a spider any bigger than my hand since that day. To tell the truth, I don't want to.

Irene married me at Cairo, and as soon as I was able, we left for England.

Now there's the story, gentlemen; you may believe it or not. . . Waiter, will you kindly bring another bottle of vermouth?