

# Weird Tales

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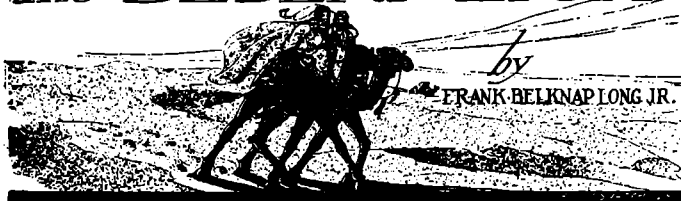
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# The DESERT LICH



**H**E HAS killed his wife, master! He is below, and he has killed his wife! All night he walked back and forth, beating upon the gate. With his bare hands, master! With his bare hands! All night upon the gate with his hands! Pound! pound! pound! It was like the desert drums, master. You have heard them? All night—and in the cold!”

Yes, I had expected him. I put my head out of the window and looked down upon him. Poor fellow! He was standing there in the cold, shivering and cursing. And whose fault was it? I had sold him a good wife, an excellent wife. He demanded too much of women; it was not in them to wear veils forever. I had warned him; I had said to him, “See here! You buy of me a woman! And she will betray you; it is to be expected. Why do you not shrug, why do you not philosophize, as do the English? Are not wives cheap: is it well to have them faithful too long? Would not anybody tire of an over-faithful woman? Faugh! I will get you another one!”

But no, he must kill his wife. It was to be expected. I descended the stairs, and let him in.

“Why is it,” I demanded, “that you come here in the cold and disturb me? It is early, and I have had no coffee. The fumes of coffee go to our heads; when

we have coffee we are happy, we smile, we furnish you with wives. That is the custom. But if you come here so early, what can you expect?”

He was bitter; he stormed. His shirt was open and I could see the long red hairs bristling on his chest.

“You must come with me! I shall show you what I have done, and then you will be happy. Come, it is not long. My camel is waiting.”

What could I do? The wrath was in him and I had given him an unfaithful wife, and was in a measure to blame.

I gave directions and followed him. It was a pity. The camels had suffered too, and nuzzled my hand. I dissolved in sympathy; these fine beasts had suffered because a fool had murdered his wife. The sands whistled between our legs. There were drums all over the desert. I was so cold that my beard froze. But I was determined. I had made a bargain, and I would keep it.

“You do not mind?”

He was riding with his face turned toward Mecca. Poor fool! He was sentimental, and believed in devils! A bleak, freezing moment! We crossed dunes, the wind whistled through our beards. The silence of the morning drew in upon us. My teeth began to chatter, but I bit my tongue and urged my camel forward. Even then repentance might have come. I am not a fool and I have

a conscience. It is not a pleasant thing to sell a man an unfaithful wife. Men have been buried in the sand for less! Once I saw a man's ears cut off for less! But what would you have? Assume that I decided to confess the fault mine. He would turn on me; I should have a knife in my side. It is not pleasant to anger a man who has red hairs on his chest. So I replied nothing, and we went on. The wind rose and lifted our saddles. It takes a tremendous wind to lift saddles. My lips began to freeze together. Would we never dismount?

What a cave! How can men live in such places? Eerily above the sands it rose, white, like a sepulcher. What madness drives men to bury themselves in such places? It rose high on each side, and slanted down in the middle. A camel's back rising out of the sand! And as white as clean-picked bones! There were bones in front, long rows of smooth, white bones. Human? Ah, yes, they were human. But no one wonders at it in the desert. For one thing, there are many lepers, and they die anywhere; like leaves they fall, and who is there to pick them up?

"For six years I have lived here!"

Poor fellow! I pitied him. To awake at night with your teeth on edge; to feel the cold in your bones; to know that you live in a tomb! And he had taken a wife to help him bear it! But is it any wonder that she rebelled?

We slid down from our poor, tired camels. We sidled across the sands. The wind licked furiously about the sepulcher! We stumbled over the bones; I groaned as a sharp point pricked through my sandals.

"Will you not enter first?"

He was bowing to me. I climbed up over the smooth, white stone. The opening was but three feet in diameter, a tiny hole in the top of a white sepulcher.

I felt around inside with my foot for a ladder. But there was nothing.

"Drop!"

Was it a trap? Should I let myself go and drop down perhaps ten, perhaps twenty, perhaps a hundred feet? Desert sepulchers run deep. He was grinning like a malicious satyr. But if I hesitated there was the knife. And after all, what is a drop of fifty feet? A broken leg, perhaps, but when one has sold a man an unfaithful wife, is it too great a payment? Did I not owe him that much? And it might give him pleasure! I felt my hands slipping on the smooth stone. I closed my eyes, and let them slip.

I fell like a freighted pomegranate. For a moment I felt the darkness closing in about me, passing through my beard and over my head. I felt the darkness, and then I became light about the heart. I was falling a great distance. I thought of many things. Why had I not sounded the baggage in advance? I should have asked her, "Do you like this chap? Is it reasonable that I should ask you to live in a sepulcher?" But then, I did not know that the fool dwelt in a tomb!

When did I think of these things? Even as I fell. In less time than it takes a camel to sneeze, and then—a great weight on my shoulders!

I had landed upon my back. Ah, you may laugh, but it was horrible! My shoulders seemed on fire! Fierce contractions under my shoulders and arms! I cried out with the pain. I was a fool, of course. Who could have heard me! It was dark, and I had fallen a great distance. All of one hundred feet! Far above me I saw a miniature speck of light which wavered. Now it was here, now there. A tiny pin-prick of light, and a voice that laughed: "Fool! fool! fool!" Was it the light that spoke?

I passed my hand over my chest: I was dripping wet. The cold had disappeared. I was lying on a smooth, warm floor. Waves of intense heat passed over me. Somewhere near by there was fire—a furnace perhaps. It flickered occasionally across the darkness, lighting the vault. I tried to sit up. But a weight was on my shoulders; I lay panting.

Then deep thoughts began to run in my brain. It was a holiday season. Men would come for wives. With crates of pomegranates, with curds, with ewe's milk, bartering, scheming, seeking wives. They were fierce, determined men. What if my boy should say, "You must depart. There are no wives here! The master has gone away and there are no wives." Would they not storm; would they not scale the wall and carry away my women? And they would never pay me; I know them too well. But perhaps one will have a kinder heart; perhaps one will say, "Surely this man is not one to lose trade. If he is gone, there is mischief afoot. Some scoundrelly free-lance may have murdered him! Hi, there, boy, in whose company did your master depart?" Ah, if they but think to ask that! But they will never ask it; I know them too well.

FOR hours, ages I lay there. Above me the spark of light vanished. In the night I lay, and groaned. But I saw things; objects made themselves visible to me. And there was the red-green illumination from beyond that flashed across the chamber. A small chamber! Twenty by twenty perhaps. And in the corner an object. It lay upon a round dais, and it repelled me. It possessed a blasphemous imperfection that I dared not openly acknowledge. It lacked the permanent quality of other objects. It had once boasted attributes—certain attributes—certain attributes! And now

it was changing, becoming more unbearable before my eyes. I closed my eyes; I endeavored to shut out the object. But the outline of it forced itself beneath my eyelids; I could not blot out that long thin form from my tired brain. I saw very clearly that I had been a fool to sell a man an unfaithful wife.

And yet what a method of revenge! And had the idiot no sense of decorum? To drop a man one hundred feet into the sarcophagus of his wife!

The next day I could move. It was difficult, but I got to my feet. The furnace had gone out, and a chill had taken me. My eyes were glued together, and the knuckles of my hands were beginning to turn black. A misery in my bones! I felt them crack as I moved across the floor. My eyes could now distinguish objects without the aid of the light from the furnace. Plague on the idiot's stupidity! He might have left me the darkness! It is these little things that hurt, a lack of common decency between enemies.

It was not pleasant to look at her. The heat of the furnace had altered her monstrously. Now the cold might help, but things had gone atrociously far. I bit my knuckles and swore in my beard.

There was a disdain in her face. A horrible, bitter grimace. And I quailed before the justice of it. And yet it was not meant for me. Coward! He dared not face the contempt in his wife's face. He had sought me out, and he had forced the disdain upon me.

The cold increased; something loathsome slid across the floor. A snake or a rat? What did it matter? The agony was all within me. My anger warmed me against the cold without. But I did not like the thought of unknown things gliding between my legs; I was tempted to climb upon the bier. What if I put his wife upon the floor? The rats would

be pleased. It was well to propitiate the vermin: they were insatiable in their greed. What if I should—and yet I had not descended so far! It was foolish to imagine such extremities! A man does not so abandon a woman for fear of rats! I could still hope.

I slid solemnly along the wall, feeling with my hands for a crevice, a crack, something definite to go upon. But nothing but damp mildew could I find—nothing but mildew one hundred feet below the desert. It came off in my hands, peeled layers of noisome greenish mildew. It was that, and the rats, which sent me back to the center of the room. I stood still, in the center, trying to rub my eyes open: they were gummy and stuck together. I could see, but only vaguely, as one perceives things in a prism. The blood pounded in my head; but I could not keep the cold out of my legs and arms. Fool! fool! fool! Something above reiterated it. It beat in through my frozen ears, it ran through my blood, and that shouted out from the tips of my fingers. Fool! fool! fool!

I might have known! To sell a man a piece of baggage for a wife! After all, the rats deserved her. Then the hunger came upon me! A longing for food, for plums, for raisins, pomegranates.

To feel both hunger and cold! To stand in the dark with rats running between your legs, and to long for pomegranates! I saw my women pressing the sweet fruit between their hands; in the darkness I could discern long rows of goblets filled with pomegranate juice! The figure on the bier appeared to mock me. Fool! fool! fool!

He was looking down upon me from above. I saw the tiny pin-prick of light, and tore at my beard. The long hairs came out in my hand. Already the skin on my face was beginning to freeze. I felt my ears: they were stiff and brittle.

Low currents of air ran along the floor; I could feel the chill breeze whistling about my legs. But these things were soon forgotten—and then came back the dreams of pomegranates. Row on row of goblets filled with pomegranate juice! I stretched forth my hand to seize one, to drain it, and I slyly anticipated the ecstasy of the warm sweet liquid. Fool! The goblets vanished into thin air; and in my open mouth I tasted the necrophilic damp of a desert sepulcher.

During the next night I was very quiet. I lay upon my back, dumbly delirious. But I knew better than to dream of pomegranates. I filled the darkness with elaborate boards, overflowing with butter cakes, bowls of rice, dates, camel's meat, spices, rich red wine! Was I not shrewd? Even in the darkness did I drain goblet after goblet of Abyssinian wine.

In the morning I called upon Allah—for the first time! Then I repented; and blasphemed. Wallah! Wallah! Wallah! Even in the morning, in the gray cold, with slithery things crawling between my legs! I instinctively began to pity the woman on the bier. I crossed over, and looked at her. Ah, she had changed!

**T**HERE is a fascination in ugliness. We long to cover it up, but it attracts us. How I longed to put a cloth over that face! And yet how morbidly fascinating that monstrous grimace that seemed to dissolve and change as I watched it! Never in life had her face possessed such an attraction.

But how satisfy a longing for pomegranates by studying a face? What a longing for food obsessed me! I began to dream of snaring the rats. If they would walk into a trap! What if I should lie down and remain very quiet? Perhaps the rats would venture out and run over me. During the night I had

several times felt tiny nostrils nuzzling my hand. And once something cold and loathsome had dashed across my face.

I lay down on the floor. It was a madness, for the chill was already in my bones. Already the gangrene had infected my armpits. I knew it too well, the dreadful, sickening pain. I knew also that my ears had turned black, that I should lose my ears. But a hunger fever was about me; I thought only of that. I was alone with my hunger.

I did not move; I did not breathe. Only above me I watched the light, the tiny white light that wavered and mocked. Fool! fool! fool! And there was the darkness and the stifling odors; horrible warm currents of air brushed across my face, and then something wet and slimy. My hand shot out and grasped it. It was soft and plump to the touch—a gigantic rat, a rare prize! What a fool a man is to barter an unfaithful wife! Yes, it was soft and I pressed it fiercely. I squeezed it as I would a pomegranate. I could feel it scratching, and struggling. The vermin! I held it very close, sought to squeeze the air out of its detestable body. Then it bit me. The wet blood trickled over my palm. I let the rat go and sat up.

Was it only in imagination that I carried my hand to my lips and sucked greedily upon it? I had no clear evidence that I had so acted. Only, why had I gladly released the rat; what thrill had seized upon me at the thought of the warm blood trickling over my hand? Fool! fool! fool! Above me the ceaseless iteration; it had become a part of my every thought.

During the day I devoured my head-dress. It was not pleasant, of course, but I got it down somehow. It had a sweet starchy taste. It weaned me from my pomegranates—for a time. But there were other insatiate longings. I

dreamed of camels. I saw long processions of camels; I stood in a desert place, a land of dead seasons that wander, and watched them come solemnly up over the rim of the desert and disappear in the burning sands. I stood with a huge knife in my hand, and as each camel passed by I made a desperate lunge at his side with the knife. Great cuts would appear in the sides of the frightened animals, and I would put my lips to the lacerations and drink up gallon after gallon of fresh warm blood.

During the next night my longing reached its culmination. I might have known! From the very first his design had been that I should do what I was about to do. Have you the heart to blame me? My legs and arms were freezing. I could scarcely wriggle my fingers. Under my arms the pain was excruciating. My entire being cried out that I should do a vile thing to satisfy my craving for relief—for food, for pomegranates!

I approached the body. I drew back the cloth which covered it. I shrieked inwardly, but I was determined. There was no alternative. The damp and agony of the sarcophagus were in my blood; my soul was green and sick with noisome mildew. My soul was like the walls of the sepulcher—niter-encrusted and necrophilic.

But even as I bent there came a burst of merriment from above. The vault echoed with triumphant laughter, and the pin-point of light grew. Shafts of soft sunlight filtered through the darkness. In the center of the vault hung a rope! A rope!

"You did not mind? In my heart of hearts, I pitied you. But it was necessary to affirm, to act. Your offence was great, but under the stars, I pitied you! Is it not written: 'Thou shalt deal alone in women of sound heart?' But let en-

mighty cease between us. Bind the rope about your waist. My wife you may leave: had you nibbled, I should have regretted—”

Quickly did I fasten the rope about me. And then up, up, up to sunlight—and pomegranates! My dear friend, never violate the Qoran.