

THE WIDE WORLD MAGAZINE

CONTENTS FOR JULY, 1915.

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The Editor invites Travellers, Explorers, Tourists, Missionaries, and others to send in any curious or remarkable photographs they may have. For these, and for True Stories of Adventure, liberal payment will be made according to the value of the material. Every narrative must be **STRICTLY TRUE IN EVERY DETAIL**, and a **WRITTEN STATEMENT TO THIS EFFECT** must be furnished. The author must also, if possible, furnish portraits of the leading character or characters (even if it be himself), together with any other available photographs and portraits of places, persons, and things which in any way heighten the realism and actuality of the narrative. All MSS. should be typewritten. Every care will be taken of contributions, but the Editor cannot be held responsible for accidental loss or damage. All communications should be plainly addressed to the Editor, **WIDE WORLD MAGAZINE**, 8, Southampton Street, London, W.C., England.


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The Haunted Tomb.

By C. H. SHANAN, Assoc.M.Inst.C.E.

ILLUSTRATED BY FRANK WRIGHT.

The author writes: "This story was told to me by the headman of Malout, a village in the Southern Punjab when I was an assistant engineer in the Irrigation Branch of the Indian Public Works Department. Several officers of the Salt Department have assured me that the narrative is true in every detail."

OU are right, sahib; as you say, I have seen many strange things in my life. Do you see that tomb over yonder? Shall I tell you a story about it? The night is still young, and maybe it will interest your honour."

So spoke Harnam Singh, the old *lambardar* (headman) of Malout, as we sat on the parapet of the canal bridge one hot, stifling night in June some fifteen years ago.

The old Customs preventive line, a high, thick thorn hedge, that stretched for miles north and south, ran on one side of the canal. This line was intended to check the smuggling of salt that had not paid Government duty from the native States into British territory. It extended from the Sutlej, near Fazilka, along the borders of British territory, to the frontiers of Berar, and was guarded by a chain of posts manned by native peons, under the supervision of European officers. The system has been abolished now for many, many years, but the hedge still exists in a few places in the Southern Punjab.

In the background, set in a treeless, undulating sea of sand, were clustered the mud huts of the villagers, raised high above the tank dug to supply the sun-baked bricks with which they were built. Numerous black blotches in the water showed where the buffaloes were wallowing to escape the tender attentions of the sand-flies and mosquitoes, unheeding the opprobrious epithets heaped upon them and their remote ancestors by the naked lads playing near the margin. The hot air quivered as the heat rose from the earth, and made one think with an intense longing of blue hills and snow-capped peaks.

About a hundred yards away, in the shelter of

the hedge, stood a small, mosque-like tomb, covered with a dome; hundreds of similar structures are to be seen scattered all over the country. It was this place to which the old headman had directed my attention; and here is the strange story he told me concerning it.

It is now many years ago, sahib, probably when your presence was a babe in arms, that a rumour got spread about that this tomb was haunted. The rumour soon grew to a certainty, for Gunda Singh himself was one of the first to see the *bhut* (ghost) while coming home late one night from his fields, and he told his wife and me. He was shaking like a leaf, and had I not been with him at Ferozeshah and known of his pluck from experience I would have said that he was a coward. When he had recovered from his fright, and could keep his teeth from chattering as if he had the ague, he described it to us. He had been to his *makki* (Indian corn) field as usual, but had been delayed there in an altercation with Ram Lal, the usurious old money-lender of the village, and it was long past sunset when he started to return.

His land, as your honour knows, lies about half a mile from here on the salt road. He came along this road singing, as is our custom, to frighten away the tree-demons, but as he neared the tomb a terrible howl struck him mute, and on glancing around he saw, by the corner of the tomb, the flaming head of a *bhut*. "It was a veritable *shitan* (devil)," said he to us, "with no body at all—just a head only, framed in white and green fire, from which two red eyes stood out distinct and appalling, steadily fixed on me. May I eat dirt, Harnam Singh," he added, "if I speak not the truth." Gunda Singh noted all



"An awful head, a bright, whitish-green light enveloping it, out of which gleamed two savage red eyes."

this in a second, and then he ran, and ran hard, till he got home.

Two or three evenings later we were all sitting at the *dharmasala* (meeting-place of the village elders), discussing matters, when Gurditta Singh and his wife's brother burst in amongst us, breathless and speechless with running and fear, and told us between gasps that they had seen a terrible *bhut* on the salt road. They had been to Alamwala and were returning when, just as they passed the tomb, there suddenly emerged from out of the shadow a *shitan* as big as a buffalo, with head and shoulders darting flames. It had a huge, grinning mouth, out of which lolled a red tongue dripping with fresh blood. It passed quite close to them, fortunately not seeing them, and went through the hedge without making the slightest noise. They were rooted to the spot with terror, but when it had gone out of sight they ran as fast as they could to the *dharmasala* to tell us.

Others then saw it, *huzoor*, and each time it was different in its appearance, so that no two accounts agreed, except in the matter of its flaming head and shoulders. To some it was the size of a large dog, to others that of a buffalo, and even once as tall as a camel, but I think terror made the man who saw it that time greatly exaggerate its size. As a rule it took the form of an animal, but when Gurditta Singh's wife beheld it, it resembled a man; and it must have cast some sort of a spell on her, for she has never since been quite right in her mind. Others, again, only heard fearful and blood-curdling screams at night; I myself heard these, and I assure you, *huzoor*, they haunted me in my dreams for many a night after. The tomb was avoided by everyone, not a man would go near it after dark, and as for the women and children—well, you had only to mention it to reduce a refractory wife or child to immediate and quiet obedience! You laugh, sahib; I know that you do not believe in *bhuts*, but I have seen not one, but three, and I have met some sahibs who do believe in them. I've heard tell, too, that your *bhuts* write and knock on tables. This is, indeed, a marvellous thing.

Esmith Sahib was the patrol (officer) here then, and, though he laughed as your honour does at the stories told, he believed them, I think.

Just about this time the usual attempts at salt-smuggling ceased, and it was very dull for me and the other hot-heads of Malout, for there were then no nightly fights such as occurred when we joined Esmith Sahib and his *chaprassis* (peons) against the low-caste Bagris, and the *lathis* (quarter-staffs) were used and skulls broken. Well, your presence, to continue. After a while the salt men found

out, by means of spies and informers, that, though the smugglers made no attempts to break through the line openly, still a great deal of salt was somehow coming across from Bikanir, and the patrols were extra watchful. But in spite of all their efforts it continued, and even grew worse. Esmith Sahib was fat, and used to be very short-tempered; but he found out nothing, so they sent him to Dalwali and put Ugecome (Edgecombe) Sahib here. He was young and a great *shikaree*; but though he tried hard the salt still came over, and now they knew well that it crossed the line close by here. Ugecome Sahib swore many times, especially when the *dak* (post) came in every day, and would then watch and lay traps for the smugglers, but all in vain.

It was the beginning of the cold weather and the grouse were just coming in; for the last few days the air was filled with their musical calls as they winged their way from the cool uplands where they had spent the summer breeding, and returned to their winter feeding-grounds. As I have said before, the sahib was a keen *shikaree*, and his heart was glad within him. Every evening he went for a long walk, taking his gun. It was lonely for him, and, like your honour, he loved to hear stories of my many experiences, so I generally accompanied him and carried the game-bag.

One evening we wandered farther than usual, and it was late when we started to return. Darkness sets in rapidly in the cold weather, as you know, and, as there was no moon, by the time we struck the line it was pitch-black. I had been telling the story of the haunted tomb and what Gunda Singh had seen, when, just as we came abreast of it, a most blood-curdling cry broke the stillness—a cry I cannot describe, sahib; it turned my blood to water. Then, lo! out of the deep blackness of the hedge stole a fearsome thing. Imagine an animal-like creature, larger than the largest dog, with long, brindled hair. It was not the body of it, however, that frightened me, but the awful head; a bright, whitish-green light enveloped it, out of which gleamed two savage red eyes. The light was not of this earth, sahib, for it moved and quivered and seemed just to float around the head. Never in my life have I beheld such a thing, and I was rigid where I stood, with my turban rising off my head. For a second the thing stood staring at us with those awful eyes, then turned and ran towards the tomb. A bang, followed by another, broke the silence; Ugecome Sahib had fired both barrels at it, but too late, for it went right through the wall and disappeared. We ran up, the sahib cursing under his breath and very excited, I still shaking with



"He was lying just inside near the mouth of the tunnel, quite dead."

THE HAUNTED TOMB.

a great fear, for to annoy a *bhut* brings bad luck, and my first grandson was but a week old. We searched carefully as best we could in the intense darkness, the sahib striking match after match, but found nothing.

"Look you, Harnam Singh," said he, "that was no *bhut* at all; it is some trick, and we are going to find it out. I have an idea we shall find the salt-smugglers in this; but we must move slowly and catch them if possible. Tomorrow night you and I will sit here and keep watch. You are not afraid; a Singh fears nothing."

I was afraid—terribly afraid, *huzoor*—but even if a Singh is afraid he does not show it, and never backs out of danger. We returned then to the bungalow.

The next night the sahib and I stole out, not telling anyone where we were going, and quietly took up our stand in the deep shadow of a *kikar* tree close to the tomb. Hour after hour went by; the sahib was getting impatient, and we were just going to give it up for that night, when suddenly the awful cry broke out on the still air; it came so suddenly that we both started violently. Thrice was it repeated, and then from under the hedge appeared the *bhut*. It stood for a while and seemed to be looking at us.

The magical light around its head and mouth was stronger than ever, and truly, your presence, it made me tremble with fear, for I believed it to be a *bhut* in spite of what Ugecome Sahib said. It seemed an age to me before he sighted and fired. With another fearful cry the thing turned and staggered to the tomb, where, as on the night before, it went through the wall and was lost to sight. We had brought a lantern this time, and on lighting it and searching about we discovered a hole in the foundations, carefully hidden by some cactus. I pulled this away, and the sahib, without any hesitation, scrambled into the hole, calling on me to follow. We groped our way along, but the hole or tunnel was very small, and it was with the utmost difficulty we could wriggle through.

At last, when I was nearly suffocated and my eyes and mouth were filled with sand, we came out inside the tomb under the dome. Then we saw the *bhut*—he was lying just inside near the mouth of the tunnel, quite dead. But even then he would have made a brave man run, for the ghostly light still quivered around his head,

and a ghastly grin showed a row of huge teeth dripping blood and froth. What was it, you ask, *huzoor*? Why, only a hyena, after all! But he was a huge brute, with some devilish magic stuff on his head and jaws, which, in the dark, gave him a terrible appearance.*

A laugh caused me to turn, and there was Ugecome Sahib waving the lantern and looking much pleased. "Lo! Harnam Singh," said he, "what do you think this is? Was I not right last night?" and then I saw what had made him so glad. For the tomb was full of nothing but salt; there it was in a great heap from the floor to the top of the dome. Only a small space near the hole was kept clear.

My tale is now told, *huzoor*, for the remainder is nothing. The mystery of the salt-smugglers was explained, but they were never caught, for one of the gang must have been close by from the start, and he gave the alarm to the rest. It appears, however, that they had fixed on this place for their enterprise; they got a hyena, tamed it, and trained it to live in this tomb and just wander about near it at nights. With some kind of paint they gave it that fearful appearance which frightened so many of us. Afterwards, when no one would venture near the tomb for fear of the *bhut*, the salt-smugglers started using it as a storehouse. One lot would bring the salt from Bikanir up to the other side of the line, and when darkness came and the coast was clear smuggle it across—they had a carefully-concealed hole in the hedge—and store it in the tomb. The peons were too frightened of the *bhut* to go near this part of their beats, so the smugglers were quite safe. The men on this side would then remove it when they got a chance, and the others would return for more.

It was an unnatural way of smuggling, I admit, but what can you expect from low-caste Bagris? After a time they returned to the good old way again, and, in fact, I think it was only a week later that we had a glorious fight with about thirty of them. We were outnumbered—two to one—and it would have gone hard with us had not a huge wild boar caused a diversion; but it grows late and the *huzoor* is yawning, so the story will keep till next time your honour comes to Malout. Good night, *huzoor*; may your prosperity increase and may you have twelve strapping sons!

* It will be remembered that Sir A. Conan Doyle makes use of an exactly similar device in his "Hound of the Baskervilles."—E.D.