

# Weird Tales

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Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 325 N. Capitol Ave., Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post-office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$2.50 a year in the United States; \$3.00 a year in Canada. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in our possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor. Copyright, 1924, by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company

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**W**E HAD been messing around in the hottest part of southern Persia, with snakes and Arab sheiks and sand fleas all pestering us to the full extent of their various abilities. Greaves was obsessed with the idea that we had located what was once the backyard of one of the ancient Assyrian kings, who used to race his two-wheeled chariots up and down the highways of those parts. On my side, I was not so sure about it. But I was certain that some food, other than the hard bread and canned meat which we had been living on for the last six weeks, would taste good.

Our map showed a native town about sixteen miles to the east. We tossed up a penny to see whether both of us should hike over, or whether I should chance it alone, and bring back whatever could be found in the way of fresh meats and vegetables. The penny fell heads up, and I was off alone. Not exactly alone, though, because old Mizrah, one of our native bearers, was persuaded to go with me. It took quite a bit of urging to get him to come along, and I wondered what was in his mind. He acted like a man who has seen a ghost in a grave yard and does not care to go back that way unless it is a matter of dire need. From what I could gather, it was neither the town nor the journey that made him afraid. I laid it to some native superstition and dismissed it from mind.

Before he would start, Mizrah insisted on daubing a little smear of black mud on my forehead, and he muttered a few guttural words in his native tongue as he did it. He was in dead earnest, so I shrugged my shoulders and let him have his will in the matter. In fact, I had come to look upon some of the strange native customs as the natural outcroppings from the mysterious country in which they dwelt. I had long adopted their loose cotton robe and sandals, because I found these more comfortable than the close-fitting shoes and shirts and trousers of civilization. The sun, and the burning winds, had tanned my skin a deep copper brown, so that, even when stripped naked, I was scarcely to be told from the men of the desert who made up our small retinue of bearers and handy-men.

It is hard to let the man who is unfamiliar with that country understand what the path was like. Underfoot, the earth was a fire-box coated with a layer of baked dust from three to twelve inches deep. Beneath that lay a bed of rotten sandstone. Here and there the sandstone cropped out in ledges, solid masses of raw red, or slashed in twisted green stripes like pools of blood with green snakes writhing on the surface.

It was late afternoon when we started. Even before the sun set, a great, sallow moon crept into the eastern sky, as if to make sure that the features of the unholy country about us should not for a moment be hidden.

On and on we pattered through the dust. The trail seemed fairly well marked, and, once on the way, I did not think it necessary to look again at the map which I had brought with me. For this carelessness I was later to pay, and pay dearly.

Mizrah made no sound, except to grunt occasionally as we passed over some unusually forbidding stretch of ground. After several hours of tramping, I glanced at my watch, only to find that it had stopped. Oddly enough, the hands stood at five o'clock, the exact hour at which we had left camp. When I pointed this out to Mizrah, he appeared shocked by the news and was for turning back at once. To him, it was an ill omen, and from the look in his eyes, he might have been expecting the moon to stay its course in the heavens, or leap down and devour us. I smiled at his childishness, but there was an odd sense of portending trouble shadowing my mind which I could not altogether down.

With no way to gage the passing of time, except by the height of the moon, it was not now so easy to estimate the distance we had traveled. At last it seemed to me that we must be nearing the end of our journey, and I began to look about for signs of human habitation. Except for an occasional jackal flitting in and out of the shadows by the rocky ledges, nothing living was to be seen.

We finally mounted to the highest point on one of the ledges, and by the light of the moon I unrolled my map and tried to locate our position on it.

The next I knew, Mizrah had hold of the sleeve of my cotton robe, and was jabbering and pointing. I looked, and saw a tiny light, scarcely bigger than the faintest stars which hung against the sky-line. It went out of sight, then reappeared then vanished again. It looked as if some one were carrying a lantern along a winding path among the ledges. I decided that

the town lay in that direction, and we struck out for it across the open desert.

If the going had been nasty before, it was terrifying now. The sandstone formations humped themselves up in the moonlight like ungainly beasts in all manner of fantastic shapes, and a slight breeze swirled the dust in shimmering veils across them, till even my nerves began to get jumpy. Mizrah was soon in a state of quivering terror, and shivering like a man chilled to the marrow of his bones. Drops of sweat broke out on his brow, and I had to smile at the strange way they shone in the moonlight, like little glass beads.

**A**T LAST we reached a well-trodden way, and it seemed we were nearing the town we sought. I began to feel relieved and to conjure up the meal I was soon to eat.

Then, without warning, came a sight which sickened me and erased all thoughts of eating from my mind. On a wooden cross, set up about twenty paces from the wayside, was nailed the corpse of a naked man. He had been horribly mutilated. At either side of him sat two huddled figures which I at first thought to be dead also, until I saw their eyes shining under their red turbans.

We left that part of the trail behind in a hurry. Evidently this was not a healthful country for certain people, and I was not at all assured of our own standing in the community.

It may have been ten minutes later when the road made a sharp turn, and right in front of us there loomed the shape of a huge stone idol, squatting cross-legged on a circular platform, with a lighted lamp in his outstretched hand, and a red turban swathing all his head above his green jade eyes. The grounds about him were well tended, and I looked right and left to discover the whereabouts

of the priests who served him. But there was no one to be seen.

Telling Mizrah to wait, I ventured up on to the platform. The lamp looked interesting. Stretching on tip-toe, I reached out my hand and touched it. With a splash and clatter it tumbled on to the floor, and just at this moment I heard a shout. I saw Mizrah turn and run headlong down the road in the moonlight. Then I leaped from the platform and dashed after him. Right at our heels rushed a good dozen of the red-turbaned figures, like the men we had seen sitting at the foot of the crucifix.

In my college days I did quite a bit of running. That night, if a stopwatch had been held on me, I am sure any mark I ever made before would have been bettered by a big margin. I overtook Mizrah in the first two hundred yards. The poor fellow was swaying drunkenly, and even now I can recall the sound of his breath as it hissed in his parched throat. The path branched, and, out of the tail of my eye, I saw him take the turn to the left and then flounder from sight. The priests took no notice of him, and this made it certain that it was my foolhardiness in tipping over the lamp that had drawn them in pursuit of us. No doubt my act had been first-degree sacrilege. The crucified figure again took shape in my mind, and, if possible, I ran even faster.

How long this kept up is not certain, but my heart was bursting, and they still held relentlessly to the trail. The path ran across a slight hillock. I struggled up it, and over the crest. One thought began to rule all my faculties. I must stop running. I must stop. Stop! The rise of ground hid me momentarily from my pursuers. Before me loomed a long circular wall. There was a vague recollection of having run like this before, a childhood memory perhaps, or a subconscious vision from the stone age. Almost

without thinking, I hugged close to the base of the wall, and instead of following the path I circled around it. I had almost completed the circuit, feet dragging, staggering at scarcely more than a walk, when a ditch stretched across my way, and I tripped on the brink and shot headlong into it. What little breath I had left was jarred out of me, and I lay as one dead for about ten minutes.

The air in the ditch stunk so foully that I was almost nauseated by it. It was darker now, and the moon was evidently setting. Finally I scrambled to my feet, and, with my head on a level with the ditch bank, looked about me. Far down the road, I could see the priests coming back from the chase. They no longer all held to the roadway, but some were spread out fanwise in couples, and quartering the ground like a pack of foxhounds. It was well for me at the moment that the shadows covered me.

What could I do? They would be certain to find me if I remained where I was, and I shuddered at the recollection of the figure on the cross, limp, mutilated, evidently tortured cruelly before he died. To one side of the ditch was a mound of earth, apparently heaped there when it had been dug. There were also several loose planks. It was a choice of scaling the wall and chancing what might lie in wait for me inside, or of being captured.

As swiftly and quietly as I could, I slipped from the ditch and crawled to the summit of the mound. Two of the planks were fairly heavy timbers, and these I placed at a slant against the wall, and after a deal of effort clambered upon them. My fingers, luckily, then reached to the top of the wall.

With a jumping kick I knocked the timbers over, and they thudded to the soft earth. Then I exerted every ounce of strength which I could muster, and despite the fact that the rim

of the wall was slimy with the droppings of birds, in one final effort I scrambled over it and swung my body inside. As I let go with my hands, the last thing I saw was a faint, rosy glow in the east, where dawn was just spreading across the sky.

It must have been twenty feet sheer that I fell before my feet struck on something soft and slippery. I inhaled a deep breath of the most putrid and nauseating air man ever smelled, skidded backward, and struck my head on the wall, and must have been knocked unconscious.

MY SENSES drifted back to me gradually. First, I was dimly conscious of the horrible odor that pervaded the place. Next, I noticed that the sun was tipping the upper edge of the wall with gold. Then I looked beside me at a huddled figure, its face and eyes partly pecked away. With an indescribable thrill of horror, I crawled on hands and knees, away from the wall and into the center of the paved courtyard. My head slowly cleared, but the stench turned my stomach, so that I was seized with spasms of vomiting. These were the more racking because I had eaten nothing in many hours, and my stomach was bare of food. It was evident that I had stumbled into one of the horrible charnel pens, or Towers of Silence, in which the strange sect known as the sun-worshippers disposes of its dead.

In one section of the circular wall stood a great wooden gate, closed, and apparently fastened from outside. Without it, I heard a murmur of voices. I had picked up enough of the various native dialects, during my two years in Persia, to understand part of what was said. The hunt for me, accursed defiler of their god, was to go on, and tortures were already being planned against the hour when I should be caught.

I had but two choices. Either I

could give myself up at once, or I might secrete myself somewhere about the enclosure and await my chance to escape. You may think it strange, but I was on the point of giving myself up, when I again thought of the figure on the crucifix, and that decided me on concealment.

Although I searched the enclosure carefully, I could find no place to hide. The floor was just a great circular stone pavement, with a walk running around the edge of it, and iron gratings on which the naked dead bodies were laid out. Finally I hit upon the plan of concealing my clothes in a crack between two paving stones, and lying naked upon the grids among the dead bodies: of course, I could sit up or walk about, so long as no one came into the enclosure. I got my robe and sandals off, and took a position such that I could stretch myself on the grid in a hurry, if any one entered.

About that time I noticed a speck or two, drifting in mile-wide spirals down the stretch of sky above me. Vultures! Soon the sky was flecked with them. One alighted on the wall. Others came to rest beside him.

Soon, with a hoarse chuckle, they hopped off of the wall and plumped down on the iron grating. Then their ghastly feast began. I can still see their smeared beaks, rending and tearing, and their snaky, featherless necks, which contorted as they bolted chunks of flesh as big as my fist. They stunk almost as bad as the corpses, and big gray lice scooted about on patches of their scaly skin, where bunches of feathers had fallen out.

Weakened as I was by lack of food and by the strenuous events of the night, it is small wonder that my mind began to wander amid this inferno of abominable stench, gruesome sights, and horrible noises. I took no note of time. Even in the hot sunshine, my body felt cold; and the pangs of thirst moved me little.

The first break in my misery came when a clamor of wailing voices broke through my reeling consciousness. It seemed inside my own head. Louder it grew; chains rattled; rusty hinges creaked; I saw that the gate was opening. There was just time to stretch myself on one of the grates before a funeral procession filed slowly in.

Through half-closed lids I watched them; saw them pile six bodies, which had been borne in on straw mats, upon the grid next to me; saw them stand with bowed heads while several vultures, drawn by this new supply of food, started their feast by pecking out the eyes of the corpses. Then the procession, with the red-turbaned priests in front and a few sorrowing women lagging in the rear, made a circuit of the walk and wound out through the gate.

Last to pass me was a young woman of about twenty-four, beautiful despite her tear-stained cheeks. I kept my eyes upon her—God! What damnable carelessness. With a blow of my fist I knocked one of the buzzards from the grid, just as his beak was descending toward my eyes. The woman saw my move, and with a fearful little sob she threw her veil topsy-turvy over her face and hurried on without looking back. To her, I must have been a dead man troubled by evil spirits.

Truth to tell, at that moment I wished myself dead, and the horror ended. As the day wore on, I felt that my senses were wandering and I was slowly going mad. I muttered at the vultures. I pounded on the stone wall with my naked fists. I bit my nails till the blood dripped from the tips of my fingers. And the agony went on, endless as time.

Evening found me stark mad, and raving. I was no more human than the vultures. A recollection haunts me of taking a short run along the stones and then jumping into the air and flopping my arms, just as the vul-

tures fanned the air with their wings when they rose to flight. But when they had all flown away I was still going through my mad antics, still a prisoner.

As the air cooled, and darkness set in, my senses partly came back to me. Hardly more alive than the half-devoured corpses, I stretched myself on the stone pavement and fell into a restless doze, marked by delirious visions of all the fantastic shapes of hell. A clammy weight was creeping up and down my naked chest. A red hot forceps was tearing off one of my thumbs. Then I awakened, and, if my throat had not been beyond all power of speech, I must have screamed in a frenzy of agony. Rats! More horrible even than the vultures! Plump, well-fed ones, they had come for their share of the ghoulish feast.

I staggered to my feet. From then on, nothing is clear. I was a mad man among the dead who would not let me rest. The spirits of all the dead that had ever rotted there returned to torment me. They wore red turbans, and had vulture beaks, and their touch was clammy. After the moon had climbed well into the heavens, one of them sailed across the sky in an airplane and threw a grinning skull at me, which struck at my feet and then was nothing but a paper-white shadow in the moonlight. I lived through all the hell of all eternity. To escape the ghosts, I pounded on the wooden gate with my bare hands and tried to shout, but my voice sounded in my ears like the croaking of a frog. At last the priests outside heard; voices debated, the chains rattled.

CAME a blinding flash, and an explosion that ripped the base from a section of the wall. The upper part swayed once, twice, then thudded to the ground, and a fan of dust belched high into the air. A second flash, more distant, and another explosion.

(Continued on page 182)

## THE TOWER OF SILENCE

*(Continued from page 162)*

Running feet. Shouts. A hand on my arm. An English voice. A short walk through the breach in the wall. Then I fainted dead away.

The next I knew, I was in my own tent with Greaves standing beside me and an English doctor sitting at the edge of my cot. It seems that Mizrah had seen me scale the wall, and had then made his way back to camp with the news. Greaves wired the information on to the British at a coast fort, some two hundred miles away. A plane was dispatched at once to our camp. Greaves went up with the pilot, and they succeeded in locating me, in fact they threw me a note, evidently the paper that I mistook for a ghostly skull. They flew back to camp, and a council of war was held. It was decided to try and dynamite the wall of my prison. Luckily we had dynamite on hand for our excavating work. For good measure, and to divert attention, they also stuck a couple of sticks, with a time fuse attached, behind the big idol. The plan worked, as you already know. The natives were frightened half to death and lost no time in getting out of that vicinity. There was already a plague of some sort among them, and they no doubt considered the whole affair as a direct expression of the wrath of their god.

Today, although I am still a young man, my hair is perfectly white. The only other visible mark I bear of my experience is a tooth-scarred thumb, which, I explain to curious acquaintances, was caught in the jaws of a rat-trap. I hope my friends who read this will understand and will withhold any further questions on the subject. I have had enough of adventure. Even talking of it displeases me. Some time I hope to sleep without morbid nightmares goading my body into a clammy sweat of fear. That is not now.