

Excerpt from the novel *Tucker's Monster*
By *S. S. Wilson*
(Harold Tucker Faces The Mummy)

In September, 1905, I had been absent from the ranch for three months. The dinosaur hunting had continued so slow that Tucker granted me a leave of absence to work on a publication with one of my former professors.

As was my habit, I returned on horseback, riding from the nearest train station. On my approach to the ranch house, Luddy loped to meet me with the limp which had stayed with him since Louisiana.

"Hey there, Whitney! Good to see ya! Need ya here, you know. Ol' Harold he gets the doldrums worse than normal when you're not around. And anyways, you're just in time. He's out in the main barn. You'll want to take a gander at what's turned up."

I confess I had little genuine interest, having by now absorbed some of Tucker's cynicism regarding any "monster" brought to our door. But I turned my mount over to Luddy and strode toward the open doors of the barn, imagining one of the usual pathetic hoaxes: a fragment of a putrefied giant squid, an alligator with pig's hooves clumsily sewn on, or perhaps another stillborn two-headed calf.

As I entered, I heard an eerie echoing voice droning in an ancient tongue, "Am Ah Tem ho rom. Am Ah Tem tinep rom. Tho thot ke flana Ah Tem rom."

I approached quietly. The voice was Tucker's. As my eyes adjusted to the dark, I saw a massive freight wagon (not unlike Triumph) hitched to a sturdy team. Tucker was standing in the wagon's bed, scowling at a papyrus scroll as he read laboriously from it. Beside him in the wagon was a huge Egyptian stone sarcophagus. It was open, the vault-like lid resting to one side.

A heavy and sickening smell wafted to me. Somewhere between acrid wood smoke and skunk musk, it overpowered the barn's normal hay and manure perfume. I noted an odd wrought-iron tripod at the head of the sarcophagus, supporting an age-old oil lamp which in turn heated a small hand-hammered copper pot. An unseen liquid bubbled softly within.

Now I saw Jenny. She was leaning against the west wall of the barn, quietly smiling. Spying me, she inclined her head, inviting me to enter. I did so, and could then see a swarthy man in flowing Egyptian robes shrunk up against the rear of the wagon, visibly trembling.

He pleaded with Tucker. "Efendi! I beg you. Do not read the words!"

Tucker paused and glanced down at him, "Shut up. I'm trying to do this with feeling." Then he saw me, "Whitney! Welcome back. Come on up. Might find it enjoyable."

He resumed his florid Egyptian oratory. After a moment's queasy hesitation, I tentatively climbed up onto the wagon to peer into the sarcophagus.

I gaped at my first mummy. I was to learn that this one was particularly well-preserved, not desiccated and blackened like so many, but pale, with leathery skin, wispy black hair, and much definition to the body. He had been a large imposing man in life, and even now seemed to gaze up with a stern countenance made even more imposing by death's grimace.

Tucker completed his reading with a flourish, then leaned down and peered closely at the mummy, almost nose to nose with it.

"Well? What d'you say, friend? Come on, Ah Tem, I'm talking to you. I'm laying eyes right on you, desecrating your rest — not that this other fella didn't already drag you about ten-thousand miles." Here the Egyptian gasped in horror, but Tucker went right on, "I'm doing my best to offend you. Make no mistake."

The Egyptian appeared about to faint. "Efendi — no!"

Tucker ignored him, "I'm waiting," he said to the mummy. There was no response. "Strike me down, or your man here stands to lose a bundle." Still no response. Tucker stood up with a frustrated grunt and casually tossed the ancient papyrus into the sarcophagus.

The Egyptian wilted against the wagon like a dying vine, "The curse *will* strike you! You no longer live!"

Tucker whirled and glared down at the man, "Listen, sandal toes, it'd make my whole day if this dust bunny was to rise up and take a swing at me, or spit some locusts, anything."

At that Tucker got a new thought. He reached over, lifted the simmering copper pot by its handle and waved it above the mummy. "Genuine article, friend. Don't want no one to say I didn't provide all the trimmings."

He noticed my questioning look at the pot and explained, "A brew of tanna leaves. Actually, leaves from the Nile bromiliad, which is the best guess anybody has to what tanna leaves really were. Costs an arm and a leg to import the silly stuff. Got me an for-sure third-century Egyptian pot and lamp, too." He gestured to the lamp. "Burning rendered camel fat, as per the recipe. That's what stinks. The horses hate it. Be acting loco for a week after smelling it."

With typical impulsiveness, Tucker suddenly tilted the pot, letting some of the viscous liquid spill onto the mummy's lips. "Come on, Ah Tem, join me in a drink?"

The Egyptian let out an involuntary shriek. Jenny leapt forward angrily. "Kiyuga! At least *some* respect!"

Tucker was mildly chastened, "Well, bless it, Jenny, I'm trying to rile him. *Somebody's* gotta call the bluff."

The horrified Egyptian now grew bolder, moving toward Tucker, pointing an accusing finger, voice rising to a frightening pitch. "Today you become of the walking dead. Your heart will burst in your body! Your eyes will boil in your head!"

Tucker roared back, his booming voice considerably more frightening, "Save it for the vaudeville! If Mr. Bones here wants to crumble my cookie, he's gonna have to stand in line! He is number *thirteen*, sir. The thirteenth mummy I have fairly challenged. I've broke their seals, read their curses, said their names out loud, talked boldly about their ancestors, spoke rudely of their gods, and borrowed an amulet here and there. Even learned to read these blessed hieroglyphics myself to make sure they knew who was insulting them. Been at it twenty years this November, and mister I'm still strutting!"

The Egyptian physically staggered under this onslaught, but maintained his resolve, pointing still. "Even so, you are cursed!"

"True enough, but that is only because your mummy is just one more in a long string of let-downs. Now pack him back to the circus!"

The Egyptian sullenly climbed into the wagon, scowling at Tucker. Finally he burst out with what no doubt concerned him at least as much as the mummy's purported post mortem powers,

" You — you have cheated me! The mummy is real! The scroll is real!"

"A deal's a deal, mister. I ain't dead. You don't get paid."

"But — it cost much to bring Ah Tem this far to your ranch! Feed for horses. Two days of ticket sales lost?" (It turned out the mummy was in fact a sideshow attraction in a circus.)

"Believe me, I know what it costs to move these blessed things around. That's why I don't foot the bill for it anymore! Now good day, sir!"

The offended Egyptian urged his team forward, invoking new curses in his native tongue — quite creatively, from the sound of it.

Tucker called after him, "By the way, fella, says on Ah Tem's scroll there's a special punishment just for those who dare to move his sacred body. Your manhood turns black and is eaten by maggots, never again to enter woman from that day on."

The Egyptian went pale and involuntarily clutched his groin, moaning, as he drove his horses faster.

"You oughta read the fine print!" Tucker shouted, "Pfhuh!"

And as the disconcerted, reward-less, and now evidently cursed man rode off, I asked my employer, "What exactly was the bargain with that fellow? Something about your dying?"

"My standard mummy deal. You bring me a mummy. I insult same. Mummy kills me within two hours — in front of witnesses mind you — Jenny pays you a thousand bucks. More than fair."

And Tucker strode off. Needless to say, unlike the rest of the world, he was singularly unimpressed with the discovery of Tutankhamun many years later.