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Volume 25 CONTENTS FOR JANUARY, 1935 Number 1

Cover Design M. Brundage
Illustrating a scene in "Black Bagheela"

Rulers of the Future Paul Ernst 2
A weird-scientific story of the monsters that rule the human race in the distant future

Charon Laurence J. Cahill 25
A different and unusual story—by the author of "They Called Him Ghost"

Hands of the Dead Seabury Quinn 36
A tale of weird surgery and dual personality—a startling story of Jules de Grandin

Black Bagheela Bassett Morgan 57
A story of brain-transplantation, and huge apes that spoke with the voices of men

Color A. Leslie 72
Verse

The Trail of the Cloven Hoof (end) Arlton Eadie 73
An astounding weird mystery novel by a British master of thrilling fiction

The Dark Eidolon Clark Ashton Smith 93
An eerie tale of the tremendous doom that was loosed by a vengeful sorcerer

The Feast in the Abbey Robert Bloch 111
The story of a grisly horror encountered in a weird monastery in the forest

The Shattered Timbrel Wallace J. Knapp 116
A strange tale about the ghastly results of a weird surgical operation

Wharf Watchman Edgar Daniel Kramer 120
Verse

Death in Twenty Minutes Charles Henry Mackintosh 121
A goose-flesh story about a death's-head spider and an Egyptian mummy

Weird Story Reprint:
The Supreme Witch G. Appleby Terrill 123
A gripping story of witchcraft—from WEIRD TALES of eight years ago

The Eyrie 140
An informal chat with the readers

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

Death in Twenty Minutes

By CHARLES HENRY MACKINTOSH

Doctor Graeme little thought how his death's-head spider plot would redound on his own head—a story about an Egyptian mummy

THIS is exciting . . . waiting here in my darkened study, with only the reading-lamp lighted on my desk, to hear the shrill, harsh cries of the newsboys calling the Extra! He will rate an Extra, surely: the good, the great, the learned Doctor Barrion. That is the measure of fame in our America—to rate an Extra—and Doctor Barrion is—or may I say, already, *was?*—famous. A bit too famous, perhaps, for his own health. "We are sorry, Doctor Graeme, but the committee appointed to choose a curator has decided in favor of Doctor Barrion, because of his wide fame as the author of the Amen monographs." He-he-he! Amen monographs! I shall be the one, Doctor Barrion, to write the last of your Amen monographs . . . an end to your growing fame, an end to your career, and to your interference with mine. Amen . . . so let it be!

I wonder whether he is now unwrapping the bitumen bandages from that fine female mummy I so freely contributed to his new curatorship. Always with his own hands, eh?—because of the scarabs and other amulets often wound in with the bandages . . . so tempting to curio-hunters and so easy to abstract! He-he-he! There is one amulet wound in with that mummy's bandages you would have done well to allow some curio-hunter to abstract, Doctor Barrion . . . but it is too late to think of that now, isn't it? One does not lightly change the habits of a lifetime.

It is costing me something, too. My

mummy—not a very good mummy, but a genuine one—and one of my two death's-head spiders from Hawaii. It was clever of me to think of my death's-head spider in this connection. It is no larger than a scarab. Strange that so tiny a creature can distill death in twenty minutes! They say it is the only poisonous thing in that Paradise of the Pacific, and very rare even there, found only in the deep woods, where my two specimens were found. Now I have only one.

I may need it for that young snip, Skipsworth, who took so great secret satisfaction in condoling with me upon the committee's decision. That sneer on his face! Damn him and all of them! "And besides, they thought Doctor Barrion had the kindlier, stronger character."—A deliberate insult! Kindlier, maybe—none but weaklings are "kind"—but *stronger!* Well, we shall soon learn who has proved the stronger. I am as strong as Death, Doctor Barrion; strong as Death, and not kind. You will not like your death . . . but then I did not like your life, and I am stronger than you, Doctor Barrion. He-he-he!

Why don't they hurry with that Extra? Surely they won't hold so rare a piece of news for the morning editions. I can't bear to sit here waiting, waiting, till morning—yet I shall if I must. I have waited so many years already . . . surely I can wait through one more night. I wonder what they will make of it, those newspapermen. Of course they will bring in the old idea of a priestly curse upon

tomb-robbers. How mad it always made dear Doctor Barrion to be classed with tomb-robbers! But they will bring that up, of course, for the titillation of their readers' superstitions.

Strange that so practical a people as ours should be so superstitious. We whose duty it is to deal with the long dead, to "rifle" their tombs and to "desecrate" their bodies . . . *we* are not superstitious. We couldn't afford such a luxury as superstition in our business, could we, Doctor Barrion? *We* are not superstitious. We are scientists, you and I, cold, rational *scientists*. He-he-he!

But perhaps even Doctor Barrion will recant during those last twenty minutes! He may rave and sob. He may shriek prayers and promises to the priests of Amen. I wish I could be there to hear. . . . But it is better to wait quietly in my darkened study with my servants below to swear that I have not been out since dinner, if any swearing should be necessary. It won't be. I have planned so surely and so well. No one can connect me with the poor, dear doctor's mysterious death. It will be the curse of Amen-Ra upon a grave-robber! A fine end for you, my dear, famous, imperious colleague!

WAS that a cry from the end of the street? "Wuxtry!" Yes, yes! they are calling the Extra! Oh, come closer, cry! Come closer quickly! Let me hear it clearly, the glad tidings of—what was that? A knock on my study door? But I left the strictest orders I was on no account to be disturbed!

"Is that you, Williams?"

No answer. Strange . . . and annoying that my orders should be disregarded. Yet, on second thought, it may be an ad-

ditional security, that my voice shall be heard from my locked study. He-he-he! Not bad, that! "Doctor Graeme was in his study with the door locked all evening! I heard his voice . . ." so the good Williams, on the witness stand.

But I am mad to think so! There will be no occasion for any witnesses. No trial. No witnesses. "Death by misadventure." A nice funeral . . . to which I shall go in my Easter Sunday outfit, after sending an appropriate wreath. More expense . . . but it must all be regarded as an investment. The committee can have no other choice than Doctor Graeme *this* time. What's that?

I swear, this waiting has given me the jitters! I thought I heard someone in the room with me . . . but the door is locked; yes, it is *locked*, I say, and no one can get in. Fool! I must get myself a little drink. Here . . . here's to you, Doctor Barrion, wherever, whatever, you are now! *Salve atque vale!*

Good God! How did *you* get in? The door is locked, *locked*, I tell you. I . . . you . . . what is it you want, *Doctor Barrion*? What is that strange phosphorescence about you? Is this some school-boy trick? What! *You came to bring me back my death's-head spider*? What's that in your hand? The spider? Impossible . . . it's death to the touch! But maybe it is dead. Maybe the bitumen-bandages smothered it. I was afraid of that . . . but what am I saying? I know nothing of any death's-head spider! God! It *isn't* dead! I saw it *move!*

Be careful man, for God's sake! There's *death* in your hand! No . . . no . . . keep it away from me! It's death, I tell you . . . horrible, agonizing death . . . *death in twenty minutes*. . . .

