

Joseph E. Kelleam has not appeared often enough in the pages of pulps to have his name acquire the familiarity of a favored author. We are sure that had his output been three times its quantity and yet of the same quality as the handful that have been published, he would be among the top lists. For each of his tales has gained applause and the deep appreciation of the most sensitive readers. There is about his tales a feeling for a mood of time and the impermanence of mortality that is never quite touched by other writers. We are very pleased to secure a new story for the Avon Fantasy Reader, a short page from the dust of ancient empires, a tale of the crumbling of a crown and of the unearthly thing that laughed in the Dog Star's light.

From the Dark Waters

by Joseph E. Kelleam

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NOW I, CARIUS, in the reign of Caracalla, son of Septimius Severus, come to write that which befell me and my master Quintus on the river Nile of a night when the moon was full.

We were, supposedly, dealers in the dried flesh of mummies which is used by apothecaries for their potions, and is also used by the witch-women of Thrace for other purposes. Supposedly, I say, but we were not reluctant to take anything else of value that we found in the tombs.

So it was that a full moon caught us in a flat-bottomed boat, poling our way along through the reeds and viscous water of the river some two-hundred miles southeast of Alexandria. Our informant, an old crone of the city, had for a price told us of a tomb hidden at the river bank which could be identified only at the lowest ebb of the water when a single step of stone thrust itself up from the Nile.

"By Mercury, the god of thieves," swore my master Quintus, "we are on an errand of fools, Carius. It was not the way of the ancients to bury their dead so close to the water."

"But the crone swore that her words were true, Quintus. And, after all, the gold we paid her is back in your purse."

He laughed. Quintus was a big man with a bare chest like a wine barrel, and his laughter echoed through the darkness like huge beats of thunder.

"Aye, it cost us nothing. I caught the crone in an alley and broke her neck—so!" He made a quick, popping noise with his tongue—a cracking as of old bones breaking.

Now the moon rose higher, full and round, and two odd rays that were somehow reflected from thin clouds gave it the semblance of a horned head, the sign of Isis. And though I knew the Egyptians and their gods to be dead and harmless, yet was I afraid.

So we poled on, and a low mist came up from the waters and settled upon us and brushed against us like the cold, fingering hands of dead men. And we poled on.

"Ho," cried Quintus. "Hold." I thrust my pole into the deep ooze of the river bottom and brought the slow-moving boat to a stop.

Quintus struck a spark and lit a pitch-soaked faggot. It flamed and sputtered and then burned brightly, setting the shadows to dancing. Ah, they fled from us, those shadows, and then stopped and waited to rush back upon us. I shivered.

"Here it is," said Quintus, holding the blazing faggot over his broad shoulders. "The step, just as the crone said."

I poled the boat around and could see the one stone step, black and venous and wet and slimy, thrust up from the low waters to the muddy bank. I felt with my pole. There were other steps down there in the water, steps going down. I felt with my pole and counted—one, two, three, four. And then my pole brushed against something that was solid but soft. Like an old log that has been under water for a long time. I fancied that a dank sigh came up from the foetid waters. . . .

I poled the boat into the mud at the water's edge and the seared reeds sighed and crackled as we stepped from the craft. From the boat Quintus took a short-handled spade, and began to dig into the mud above the moss-slimed step. Each spadeful of wet, noisome mud that he moved away made a sucking, slobbery sound.

At length he uncovered a stone slab about four feet square. It was old—old and damp and slimy. The characters upon it were nearly obliterated but

one I could make out by the flaring light of the faggot. This was the figure of the jerboa, Seth, who some say was the oldest of all gods—since terror was born from the hot slime of earth long and long ago. And this was strange because the jerboa has been removed from most of the tombs.

There was a bronze ring set into the stone. As we seized upon it I was filled with a great dread, and even Quintus' broad face wore a troubled frown. We had opened these graves of the ancients before. We did not fear their dead; neither did we fear their gods—save Isis, who, as all men know, is revered by many Romans.

But this was no tomb dear to mother Isis. Its owner had loved more terrible gods.

We heaved upon the bronze ring. The door had been there for ages agone. The river had flowed over it time after time. Quintus' broad, naked shoulders strained. At last, gasping for breath, we ceased our labors and Quintus went over the edges of the stone with the spade, gouging, prying. Then having rested we seized upon the bronze ring again and heaved until my blood was pounding in my ears.

"It moves," whispered Quintus, his huge muscles standing out on his back and shoulders like coiled snakes. "Pull."

I heaved.

With a sad sighing the pivoted block swung upward. We felt a rush of air as the mist whirled downward into the long-empty crypt. Then a foul odor of decay and death came pouring out so that we had to turn our faces away from the opening.

Quintus thrust his torch into the tunnel. Some dark steps led down. How many steps there were I do not know. There were many and they rounded several curves but always they led downward; at times as I looked at them it seemed that they were of an opaque blackness and that things were beneath them looking upward at us with cold, ophidian eyes.

There was writing upon the walls, as upon other tombs, but this writing was not the pictures of feasting and dancing and hunting that the old Egyptians had loved. It was of tortures and flayings and abominations.

I stayed close to Quintus.

"Eh, Carius," he grunted. "I have never seen a tomb such as this one."

"The others were old," I answered. "But this is older, much older, as old as the world, it seems."

He laughed. "You are afraid of shadows, Gorius. Think of the gold ahead—"

And suddenly we rounded another bend in the down-sweeping corridor, and before us was the tomb. It was not locked. A gold-flecked door swung open, as though awaiting us, and beyond it was a throne of chryselephantine and more gold than a man could desire.

But there were other things in that tomb. At first I thought that the seated figure upon the throne was a statue, but it was not. It was the shrunken, though well-preserved form of a man, bedecked with jewelled trappings. It was not wrapped in linen but the body was better preserved than many I have seen. And the eyes! Had some priest learned to preserve them too, or were those ~~curiously~~ ^{curiously} fashioned lobes of glass that peered coldly at us?

About the floor were bones of men. It was the ancients' practice to bury slaves with their dead. But the owners of these bones had died horribly. The skeletons were shattered, crushed, twisted. And then I found myself thinking: Did these men die before the tomb was sealed, or were they interred alive to give sport to something or someone? Or did they come later, even as we have come?

But Quintus and I did not think for long of the crushed bones. There was much gold there, ornaments and jewelled daggers and tiny statues. We began to gather up these things.

"Listen, Quintus." I stopped. From far away, up the dark stairway that had brought us there, came a sound. It was the sound of something being drawn out of deep muck.

He stopped and listened, his bare chest heaving with excitement, his eyes burning at the sight of so much gold. "Only the splash of waters against the step," he told me scornfully.

We went back to work but I was fearful. I stayed close to the rear of the tomb, near that undraped figure on the throne. Quintus worked close to the doorway.

"Hurry," he cautioned, "our torch will not last much longer."

Then it seemed to me that I heard another step. I looked up from my labors.

Quintus was squatting on the floor, his back to the doorway, sorting out a heap of treasures before him. But in the black square of the doorway was a shape that was even blacker than the darkness. It was not the shape of man

or beast. I had only time to stare at it, I could not cry out. And then it was upon Quintus' back like an obsidian shadow. Two black twisted talons clutched at his throat.

Quintus was a strong man but he did not struggle. He did not cry out. He looked at me with the eyes of a dead man, and his huge muscles stood out like heavy vines upon his chest and arms and shoulders. But he did not move.

I fell back against the chryselephantine throne. I could not help.

And as I watched a change came over Quintus. His eyes lit up, suddenly, with a baleful green glow. His face seemed to dissolve and reform. It was still the face of Quintus, but it had an unholy strength to it and the mouth and the lines upon his face seemed to waver and change into markings of age-old cruelty and hate. His arms and chest became mottled, and scales grew over them like a green mold. And the black shadow that clutched him with the twisted talons seemed to dissolve and flow into the straining body of Quintus.

Then the black shadow was gone and Quintus leaped at me like a wild beast, foam slavering from his curled lips.

I was without strength. I cowered back against the throne. My hand clutched at the long-dead flesh of the mummy.

Quintus stopped. Two strong wills seemed to clash there in the tomb, and with a snarl Quintus turned and fled up the dark stairway.

And our sputtering torch burned low and flickered out.

They say I was stumbling through the streets of Alexandria muttering these words: "When Seth of Tanis, the lord of evil and abominations, shall conquer Hapi of the Nile, then Keb and Sothis shall be his slaves."

The words meant nothing to me. I was feared and shunned. The days passed like a dream and, in some fashion, I came back to Rome. I am not a learned man, but I remember that someone, somewhere, told me that Sothis was a goddess—Sirius the Dog Star was her Seal.

And of nights when the Dog Star is shining I seem to go a-wandering—but not alone. My companion is the one who sat on the chryselephantine throne—the one who should have been dead and mummified long and long ago. I dream of huge caverns in the earth and high colonnades and dark green rivers filled with lotus blossoms. But all seem to be crumbling, and a strange blight seizes upon the lotus blossoms as I watch, and they wither. And the one who wanders with me of nights laughs softly and evilly.

I have seen Quintus once since that awful night. It was when our ruler Caracalla came back to Rome with all his legions. And men told me that he had a new adviser, a priest out of Egypt.

So I stood near his beautiful new archway when the legions passed. And someone beside me seemed to be laughing in my ear. They passed, and I saw Caracalla. And I saw his counselor, this Egyptian. No Egyptian at all, but Quintus, or the thing that took the form of Quintus that night in the tomb. You must believe me. Why does he wear that tight-fitting cloak? Strip it off and you will see the scales upon his arms and chest, as did I.

The Empire is falling apart. Caracalla is mad. He destroys his own cities and his own people. And who or what is this Egyptian who is his counsellor?

I cannot think straight. I have helped to unleash something ancient and terrible upon the world. The Roman legions are going, dispersed and slain. And something walks by my side of nights when the Dog Star is shining, and laughs and laughs and laughs.