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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

"He was lost!"



Murder in the Grave

By EDMOND HAMILTON

A grim story of a terrible ordeal—a night of terror ten feet below the surface of the ground

WALTERS lay in his coffin ten feet under earth's surface and looked up through the square air-tube at a patch of blue sky. There appeared at the tube's upper end the face of Charlie

Rusper, his manager, looking down into the electric-lit coffin.

"Everything all right, Walters?"

Walters nodded. "All okay. Does it look like much business this evening?"

Rusper's head bobbed. "Yeah, looks as if the carnival will pull good crowds in this town and we'll get our share of it. We've done better so far than any other outfit in the carnival."

"Why make it 'we'?" Walters demanded. "I'm the living corpse, not you. I'm the one who has to stay planted down here a week at a time to let boobs gape down at me."

But when Rusper's head was withdrawn above, Walters smiled. It was really a swell racket, he told himself. A swell racket, and an easy one. While the other carnival performers went through wearying routines night after night, all he had to do was lie down here in his comfortable, warm and roomy coffin for a week. And he made more money than any of the others.

He always felt like laughing at the ignorant saps who paid good money simply to goggle down the tube at the man buried alive. Well, as long as they wanted to do it, it was all right with him. He didn't mind taking it easy down here and getting good money for it.

Another face appeared up at the top of the tube, that of Tessa Morden, the wife of Sam Morden, who ran a wheel-concession. She smiled down the tube at him.

It gave Walters a warm, satisfied feeling to see Tessa smiling like that at him. It made him want to go to Sam Morden and tell him things about Tessa and himself, just to see the man's colorless face twist and change.

"Hello there, corpse," smiled Tessa down the tube. "I see you're buried again."

"You didn't think I was such a corpse last night," Walters said meaningly.

She laughed full-throatedly. "After a week down there, no wonder you're a wildcat when you get out."

Her tone changed suddenly. "Here

comes Sam," she said. "The boob probably needs me over at the tent."

In a moment her face was replaced at the tube's top by the thin, gray face of Sam Morden. He blinked down the tube.

"We have to open up our concession, Walters," he said. "The crowd is beginning to come in."

"That's all right," said Walters equably. "Tessa was just kidding me a little."

When Morden went away, Walters laughed to himself. What would the fool say if he knew? he wondered. He could imagine the hurt, incredulous look he would assume.

The patch of blue sky at the top of the foot-square tube began to darken, and the evening rush of business began. The crowds drifting into the carnival were attracted by Rusper's stentorian barking.

Walters could faintly hear Rusper's voice. "Buried alive, ladies and gentlemen, a human, living being buried ten feet under the earth's surface. Lying down there day and night for a week with only a tube connecting him to the surface! How would *you* like to be buried ten feet beneath——"

ONE head after another appeared at the top of the tube, peering down into the lighted coffin where Walters lay looking up at them. Most of them had an expression of mingled curiosity and horror.

Walters was used to that. He felt nothing but contempt for them. Saps, that's what they were. Just for a look at him, handing over the money that he spent freely when he was on the surface, on himself and Tessa.

He lay there, now and then flexing his muscles to keep off stiffness, while the heads appeared and vanished above. The customers fell off toward eleven o'clock and at midnight the carnival closed. Then

Rusper let down a late supper for him through the tube.

When he had eaten it and the dishes had been drawn back up, he and Rusper tested as usual the button in the coffin that rang an electric bell in Rusper's tent. It was in order, and the manager bade him good-night.

Walters turned out his light and lay in the coffin in darkness. He was drowsily content, looking up through the tube at a square patch of starry sky. He didn't know that he had drifted off to sleep until he was suddenly aroused by a sound above.

He opened his eyes sleepily and saw against the bright stars at the top of the tube a man's head. The man was talking down the tube to him in a low, husky voice, and it was this that had aroused him.

"Walters, do you hear me?" the man above was calling softly down. "Are you awake?"

"Who's that—Rusper?" Walters demanded. "What the devil do you want?"

"It's not Rusper," said the soft voice. "It's Morden, Walters—it's Sam Morden."

Sam Morden? Walters felt quick irritation at being roused from his sleep by that fool.

"Why wake me up at this time of night?" he demanded.

Morden's laugh came softly down the tube. "Can't you guess why, Walters? Haven't you the slightest idea?"

A little chill shot through Walters. Had Sam Morden discovered that he and Tessa—but no, of course he couldn't have.

He made his voice angry as he answered up the tube. "Will you tell me what you're talking about?"

"I'm talking about what's been going on between you and Tessa," Morden's

voice whispered down. "You think I haven't known, Walters? You think I haven't seen the looks and smiles between you two, that I haven't known how the whole carnival is laughing at me?"

"You're crazy if you think there's anything between Tessa and me!" Walters said vehemently. "Why, we're just good friends, is all. Go and ask her and she'll tell you the same thing."

"No, she won't tell me so," Sam Morden said softly. "She won't ever tell anyone anything, Walters, for she's dead."

"She's what? Do you mean to say that you——" Walters, aghast, could not finish, but Morden did.

"That I killed her? Yes, I did, Walters. And I'm going to follow her myself. And so are you, Walters! That's why I came here before I went myself. You're going to die, too, tonight. But you're going to die differently from Tessa and me."

Walters was pressing furiously on the button at his left side, the button of the bell beside Rusper's cot. It would bring Rusper on the run, and if the maniac above would hold off——

The gentle voice came down the tube, as though the man was able to see down into the coffin's darkness and perceive what he was doing.

"If you're trying to ring your bell, you're wasting time. I cut the wire, Walters. That was the first thing I did."

Walters was held dumb for a moment by the icy shock of that information. Then he gave utterance to a loud yell.

"Rusper!" he yelled up the tube. "Rusper, help! Morden's trying to murder me!"

The coffin's interior rang with the reverberations of his cry until his ears hurt. "Rusper, do you hear me?"

"Rusper can't hear you," chuckled softly the shadow above. "Nobody can hear

you but me, Walters. I wouldn't yell any more if I were you. I'd lie there as quiet as I could."

"What—what are you going to do?" Walters stammered.

Morden's voice was a caressing whisper. "You're going to die, Walters, but you're not going to die quickly from a bullet like Tessa just did, or like I will when I've finished here with you. That would be too easy on you. You're going to die in a way that's slower than that, a way that will give you a lot of time to think before you go."

There was a rustle above and Walters' straining eyes made out something coming slowly down the dark tube. It looked like a cloth bag being lowered by cords, from the dark outline of it.

It was lowered until it hung in the tube just a few inches above Walters' head and shoulders. He found himself breathing now with great difficulty, as though a strap had tightened across his breast.

Morden's voice came down to him. "Do you know what's in this bag I've let down to you, Walters? It's death, the death I've decreed for you. Walters, there's a living rattlesnake in this bag. One of the snakes belonging to Barth's snake-charmer show. Yes, I stole it from Barth's tent tonight for just this purpose. In a second I'm going to pull the cord that will empty the bag, and let the snake in there with you. Yes, in there in the coffin with you! If you lie very still it may not strike you at first. But you can't lie still long, and when you move it'll strike.

"That's the death you're going to have, Walters. I'm going off to a clean, quick death myself, one I'm glad to meet. You'll envy me when you're in your death-throes down here. And here comes that death—now."

As Morden spoke the last words, Wal-

ters heard the bag rustling in movement. Instantly there was a slight hissing sound and a cold, scaly length flowed down across his chin and neck.

Walters had been frozen into a petrification of horror by the revelation of Morden's purpose. That petrification held him as the snake's cold body glided across his neck and chest.

He lay like a man frozen. In a moment the heavy length of the snake had crossed his chest and then for a brief time lay unmoving over his right arm, which was extended along his side.

He could not have moved the slightest muscle of his body, even had he desired it. He lay there as motionless as a dead man, his staring eyes turned upward to the tube as they had been just before the bag had been emptied upon him.

He could see as through a dark haze the bag being drawn up again. For a moment longer the dark head of Morden was visible against the stars up at the tube's top, apparently looking down. Then it vanished. Morden was gone. He was alone down here in the coffin with the snake.

Walters, lying utterly rigid, tried to tell himself that this was all but a nightmare, that he would wake up and laugh in relief at this horrible dream. Of course it was only a nightmare! But even as he told himself that, he felt the snake's body moving again, gliding on across his right arm and settling between it and the coffin's side.

The snake seemed moving in a circular manner now in the space between his arm and the side. It apparently was coiling up, the rustling sounds it made magnified to thunder in Walters' bursting ears. In his nostrils was the musty, bitter scent of the reptile's body.

He lay there, staring rigidly up the tube at the square of stars, striving to

seize some rational thought out of the mad race of horrors in his brain. The feel of the coiling body against his arm almost erased everything else in his brain but sheer terror, yet one thing remained clear to him.

HE MUST not move. That was the first essential, that was life or death. The reptile had not yet been angered by his proximity, probably because it was accustomed to being handled by a human being in the snake-charmer show. But if he moved in the darkness, the snake coiled against him would sense menace and strike.

Walters lay with every muscle taut, just as when the snake first had been released in his coffin. His right arm, beside which the thing now was coiled, had been a little upraised, and despite its aching he dared not lower it now. No matter what else he did, he must make no perceptible motions.

What was he to do? He tried to concentrate calmly on the problem. He must keep cool, must not give way to the insensate horror that pounded at the portals of his brain. He must find some way of escape from this hideous death Morden had planned.

He was not thinking of Morden now at all. Neither had he any thought of Tessa. Love, hate, all other emotions had given place to the fear that clawed his vitals. No person, no thing in the world had any reality to him now, nothing but the snake coiled up here beside him in the dark coffin.

He could not lie motionless like this for ever, Walters knew. Sooner or later he would have to make a movement. So he must find a way out of this terrible dilemma before he made such a movement and the snake's fangs struck. Yet what way out was there?

What about the bell-button? Morden had said he had cut the wire, and when he had pressed it Rusper had not answered. But maybe Morden had lied about cutting it, Walters reasoned feverishly. Maybe Rusper had simply not heard it, or had been out of his tent. Or if the wire had been cut, perhaps someone had noticed and had repaired it.

Surely the bell would ring now if he pressed the button. It would bring Rusper to the tube's top, and he would call softly up the tube to Rusper and tell him of the snake. They would find a way to get him out of here and kill the snake, once they knew. Rusper would find a way.

Walters' left hand was a few inches from the bell-button. He moved it toward it. He meant the motion to be an infinitely slow one but his overstrained nerves betrayed him and his hand's first movement was a little jerk. At once he stopped, cold with increased terror. The snake had moved a little in its coils at the jerk.

He waited for minutes, unmoving. Then his hand crept slowly on. The few inches between it and the coffin's side seemed a vast distance now. At last his fingers encountered the side, crept along it to the button. He could have sobbed with relief as he pressed in the button.

He held the button in. Even now the bell must be ringing in Rusper's tent, and Rusper must be springing from his cot to answer it. Walters' brain calculated the distance between the tent and the tube. Now Rusper must have reached it, and he waited tautly for the call down the tube.

It did not come. But perhaps Rusper had stopped to dress, Walters told himself with feverish hope. That would make him a few minutes later. He waited those few minutes, his left hand still

on the button. But no head's dark outline broke the square of starlit sky above.

It might be that Rusper had been delayed—no, he had not heard the bell! It had not rung! The truth hammered home into Walters' brain, would not be denied. Morden had cut the wire as he had said, and the bell was dead. He had been merely deluding himself with hopes sprung from desperation.

There was no hope from the bell—and neither was there any hope of anyone hearing him if he shouted up the tube. One had to be directly at the tube's top to hear him, he knew. And if he did shout, the snake would surely be stirred to strike.

Perhaps someone would happen to look down the tube? That hope flickered across Walters' tortured mind and then faded, vanished. Who would come? No one ever came at night. Someone might think of him when the bodies of Tessa and Morden were found. But they'd not be found until morning.

What was he to do, then? What *could* he do, when the first movement he made would probably cause the reptile to strike then and there? It seemed to Walters that he had been lying motionless already for hours, with the snake's cold body coiled beside his arm. Time had become for him endless, immeasurable.

The desperate thought came to him that he might reach out and kill the snake with his bare hands. It would bite him as he did so, of course. But a man did not die immediately from a rattlesnake's bite, he knew. If he could escape from the coffin soon enough after he was bitten and receive treatment, he would live.

But no—it was impossible. Even though he killed the snake now, he would still be unable to attract the attention of anyone above. He would still have to lie in the coffin until morning, with the

poison circulating in his body, and long before morning he would have died hideously.

Yet neither could he lie motionless here with the snake until morning. He must do something, he knew. Beyond that necessity his mind refused for the moment to function. His brain was so clouded by horror that he could not think consecutive thoughts.

Then Walters had an idea. Suppose he got his left hand a little up the tube, rapped on its side? That would surely not arouse the snake, for most of the sound would go up the tube. And such rapping should be audible to anyone above who might chance to pass near the tube's mouth.

He assured himself that it would. To his quivering brain the problem was resolved suddenly into a single difficulty—if he could but rap on the tube's side he would be heard and rescued. He began to move his left hand again, bringing it slowly up toward his face.

He moved it without a sound, bending his elbow. There was no movement from the snake beside him and Walters' hopes rose. The snake was sleeping, *must* be sleeping! He would win clear of this hell-trap yet.

HE GOT his hand to the tube's opening, above his head. He had to bend his wrist to get his hand up the tube. It went up the tube but a few inches before the bend of his wrist stopped it. He tested and found that he could reach the tube's side with his clenched fingers.

He waited a moment, then knocked softly on the side of the tube. To Walters the sound seemed a series of deafening thunderclaps breaking the coffin's silence. There was no answering sound from above and he rapped again, more loudly.

Buzz-zz-zz! The snake's sharp, dry rattle filled the coffin's interior with the suddenness of lightning. Its coils had stiffened against Walters' arm, and he could almost see the upraised head with its gaping fangs, the stiff, erect tail vibrating.

The snake sounded its rattle again. Walters remained frozen with his hand in the tube. The sound had paralyzed him in a sheer incapability of movement. He waited in an ecstasy of dread for the rattlesnake to strike.

Then he felt a smooth, elongated mass slide down along the right side of his body on the coffin's floor. The snake, disturbed and alarmed by his rapping, was moving. Walters heard the dry sound of its gliding progress. He lay in darkness, unmoving as a corpse.

The snake's weight came suddenly upon his right ankle. It slid smoothly over the ankle, the coldness of its body perceptible through his thin sock. A moment later he felt its weight on his left leg also, below the knee.

For a moment the snake's movement stopped; it felt like a heavy rope lying across his legs. Then the thing's weight twisted up his left leg and thigh toward his waist, toward his head.

He lay in the same petrified position, his right arm against his body, his left one doubled up with its hand a few inches inside the tube-opening above him. He felt the snake glide up past his waist onto his left breast, over his light shirt.

It halted there a moment, then began a circular movement. The snake was coiling up on his left breast, Walters knew. Either its alarm had now been dissipated or it liked the greater warmth there. It completed its coiling and lay unmoving.

Walters had not expelled or inhaled air into his lungs since the snake had sounded its rattle. His lungs seemed on fire now, he could go no longer without

breathing. Slowly he exhaled and as slowly breathed in fresh air, controlling his famished lungs by an infinite effort of will.

The snake coiled upon his breast did not seem disturbed by this slow breathing. He could breathe, at least, and he must do nothing else until morning. He must make no slightest movement, or the already-disturbed snake would strike. His one chance of life was to lie frozen until morning.

His life now depended directly upon his ability to stay immobile. He must not move—he must not move. It was surely possible for him to lie a few hours motionless when life itself was at stake.

It could be no more than four or five hours until morning. He was sure that at least two hours had passed since the carnival had closed and Rusper had bade him good-night. Maybe it had been more than that, maybe three hours, or even four. He might have slept for some time before Morden had awakened him.

Morning might be far nearer than he thought, Walters told himself. His dazed brain seemed unable to form clear ideas of time. It seemed to him that he had been lying here in the coffin with the snake for days, weeks, years.

His skin was creeping, crawling slightly on his body. It was as though his body was independently aware of the thing that was coiled upon it, and strove to shrink from it. His left arm ached and throbbed from its bent, raised position.

WHAT was the snake doing? Was it resting there on his breast in quiescent coils, or did it have its head erect in the darkness. If he could only see the thing, Walters thought. The horror of seeing it would be preferable to having it here in the coffin with him, on his breast, yet unable to see it.

Did the thing have its head raised, swaying slightly to and fro, the filmy eyes staring through the darkness? Its head might even at this moment be moving toward his face, forked tongue darting in and out. He felt that he could *see* that hideous head, and that it *was* swaying toward his face.

His left arm was twitching a little, a movement his brain could not control. And now Walters seemed to see through the darkness the snake aware of that movement, raising its tail, opening its mouth to bare the dreadful fangs.

It was but his imagination, he told himself desperately. He must not lose his nerve now—morning must be close at hand. But his arm continued to twitch a little, against his will, his hand vibrating slightly inside the tube.

The coils upon his breast were moving, stirring. This was not imagination—the snake was again becoming alarmed. He *must not move, must not move!* But the arm continued to twitch, and as though in contagion his left leg had begun to quiver also.

He could not control them. His body was passing beyond his brain's control, was moving despite the snake's warning stirrings. In a moment it would break completely from his brain's orders and would thrash wildly about. He *knew* it would—even now it was stirring more and more strongly.

He was lost! The snake's rattle was buzzing sharply and loudly in the dreadful warning. And then with a hoarse scream Walters' body arched convulsively in the coffin's darkness and he clutched madly at the snake's body as he felt the sharp fangs in his throat.

RUSPER's face and those of the men about him were masks of horror as they looked down into the coffin they had hastily unearthed, at the twisted body and dead, distorted face of Walters. The lifeless length of the big rattlesnake was still clutched convulsively in his hands.

"God, what a way to die!" Rusper whispered. "Only a jealousy-mad maniac like Morden would have killed a man in a coffin with a snake."

Barth, the snake-charmer, shook his head as he stared down at the dead reptile. "It wasn't this snake of mine killed him," he said.

Rusper and the others stared. "But he's dead—and there's the mark of the snake's fangs on his throat!"

Barth nodded. "But that bite didn't kill him—it couldn't. Every one of the snakes I use has its poison-sacs taken out before I'll work with it. Naturally I keep that fact to myself. Morden didn't know it and neither did Walters. He died down in that coffin from pure terror alone."

