

WEIRD TALES

THE UNIQUE MAGAZINE

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*The Occultism of Ancient
Egypt Permeates*

The Hall of the Dead

A Strange Tale

By FRANCIS D. GRIERSON

YOU have good nerves?" asked Professor Julius March, with a somewhat cynical smile.

Annette Grey shrugged her shoulders.

"People who work for their living," she replied, "cannot afford nerves."

The Professor nodded.

"There is something in that," he answered, thoughtfully. "At the same time, I must make the position clear to you. As you are aware, I am an Egyptologist, and in my house here I have many queer things. Some people dislike the idea of working among mummies and——"

Annette interrupted him with a deprecating gesture.

"Believe me," she said, "that sort of thing does not affect me in the least. As your secretary, I am prepared to work where and when you like."

"My former secretary——" the professor began, and paused.

"Your former secretary disappeared," said the girl. "Of course I know that; you will remember that I applied for the vacancy after reading about her in the paper. I do not propose to disappear; the terms you offer are too good."

She smiled faintly, and the Egyptologist shrewdly eyed her.

"Well," he said at last, "your qualifications and education appear to recommend you for the work I should want you to do. It is secretarial work in the broadest sense of the term—from typing my notes (when you have learned to decipher my abominably bad handwriting) to looking up references in the British Museum, or—should occasion arise—accompanying me on a flying visit to Egypt. I give you fair warning that I shall work you hard, but, apart from the salary and board, which I have already named, you will not find me ungenerous if you prove yourself valuable."

"Then I may consider myself engaged?"

March bowed.

"Certainly," he replied. "You will probably learn presently," he added, in his cynical way, "that I am regarded as an eccentric person, and somewhat of a hard taskmaster——"

"I prefer to form my own opinion," said Annette quietly.

Again he smiled. It was not a pleasant smile.

SO ANNETTE GREY took up her residence in the rambling old house on the outskirts of London in which Professor Julius March had gradually accumulated relics of ancient Egypt that were regarded with

respect by the curators of some of the greatest museums in the world.

There were those who hinted that the Professor had not always been scrupulous in the methods he adopted to secure his rarer curios; but March laughed at such stories when anyone had the hardihood to repeat them to him, openly attributing them to the jealousy of less fortunate rivals. Wealthy and profoundly learned, he had become known as one of the greatest Egyptologists of his day.

Annette studied her new employer with the patience characteristic of her nature, and she found the study an interesting as well as a useful one. March, for the most part, was reserved and silent, but he was capable of bursts of extraordinary excitement. He devoted himself, with an almost religious fervor, to the pursuit which he had made his life study, and the few friends he possessed—for he was not a popular man—were almost all brother archeologists.

Tall and thin, with black eyes peering through large tortoise-shell-rimmed spectacles, his gray hair tumbled in a shaggy mass over his broad forehead, he had a habit of thrusting his square chin aggressively forward when he spoke. His long, graceful fingers moved in nervous sympathy with what he was saying, and he would spring from his chair and walk rapidly up and down with catlike steps that reminded Annette of a panther ceaselessly pacing to and fro behind the bars of its cage.

Possessed of great endurance, he would sit for hours at a stretch poring over an ancient papyrus, disdain- ing food and sleep. Then, plunging into a cold bath, he would emerge glowing, eat an enormous meal and set off for a long walk, indifferent as to whether it happened to be day or the middle of the night.

When March first asked her whether or not she had good nerves. Annette had supposed him to be referring to the disappearance of Beatrice

Vane, his former assistant. Beatrice, a beautiful girl just budding into the maturity of womanhood, had vanished utterly, leaving her clothes and other possessions behind her, but no clue as to where she had gone. March, with his lawyer, Henry Sturges, had sought the assistance of the police, and every effort had been made to trace the missing girl, but without success.

Attorney Sturges, who had recommended Beatrice Vane to Professor March, had been the girl's guardian. An orphan, she had been left a small annual income, the capital of which was under Sturges' control as trustee. She had received a good education, and the lawyer had procured her employment with Julius March in order that she might occupy her time and at the same time supplement the scanty income which declining financial conditions had left her.

March spoke highly of her work, and was more affected by her disappearance than many, who saw only the cynicism of the man, would have believed. He feared, Annette supposed, that his new secretary would think it unlucky to step into the shoes of the girl who had vanished so mysteriously, and she hastened to disabuse his mind of any such idea.

But Annette soon found that there existed an additional reason for his question. The old house, she found, was divided into two parts. In one, the smaller of the two, lived March and his staff. A bachelor, he was looked after by an elderly housekeeper, one or two maids, a chauffeur and a confidential valet, who had been with him for years. These people attended to what he called the "domesticities" of the place.

The larger part of the house was consecrated to his hobby, and had been, indeed, altered and partially reconstructed to suit his unusual requirements. Into this Egypt in miniature the servants were sternly forbidden to penetrate. There March

would bury himself amid his mummies and papyri, and sometimes, in his morose moods, even his secretary was forbidden access.

Annette had a comfortably-furnished sitting-room of her own, and a little room furnished as an office, but a great part of her work, she found, was to be done in the room which March grimly called the "Hall of the Dead."

It was, indeed, an apartment in which only a girl of strong nerves could have worked without glancing fearfully over her shoulder. Floored with black-and-white marble, alternated in a curious pattern, it was dimly lit by a lamp swung from the roof by bronze chains. To afford the stronger light necessary for the study of ancient inscriptions, a smaller lamp stood on each of two small tables, the incongruous effect of their electric wiring being mitigated by their antique shape. These lamps, however, illuminated only their immediate neighborhood, leaving the greater part of the huge room in semi-obscurity.

Round the room were placed at regular intervals mummies and mummy-cases, whose grave immobility seemed but a mask which they could tear off at will, descending to move about the hall with measured steps and to converse on topics that had been of living importance to a long-dead civilization.

In the center of the hall stood a great stone table, curiously grooved and hollowed, and between the mummies were placed objects of metal and earthenware, the uses of which Annette could only guess.

In this strange room March would pass hour after hour. Annette soon learned to understand and accommodate herself to his methods. The sharp sound of an electric bell in her room would bring her to the Hall of the Dead, notebook and pencil in hand. The heavy door, controlled by an automatic mechanism, would roll

back as she approached, closing silently behind her as she entered and took her seat, without a word, at one of the smaller tables.

Acknowledging her presence only by a gesture, March would stride up and down the room with his quick tread, pausing now and again to examine a document or to apply a magnifying glass to the inscription on a mummy-case, muttering to himself as he resumed his rapid pacing. Suddenly, without warning, he would commence to dictate, in sharp, staccato sentences, admirably lucid and without a superfluous word.

He would cease as suddenly as he had begun, and for perhaps half an hour, or longer, he would remain buried in thought, resuming his dictation as unexpectedly as he had ceased, but without ever losing the sequence of his ideas.

Sometimes this would go on for hours. On such occasions he would recollect himself suddenly, glance at the ancient water-clock on its carved pedestal, and dismiss Annette with a word of apology for his forgetfulness.

Once an incident occurred which revealed yet another side of this man's complex character.

Annette had received a lengthy piece of dictation, and had been at work in her office for nearly an hour, transcribing her notes. She was a competent writer of shorthand, but some of the technical expressions which March used were quite unfamiliar, and she did not care to interrupt him, preferring to wait until he had finished before asking him any questions. On this occasion it had seemed fairly plain sailing, but toward the end of her notes she came across a sign the significance of which completely baffled her.

Finding that the context was of no assistance, and not wishing to delay the work, which she knew the Professor required as quickly as possible, she resolved to consult him.

It was the first time she had visited the Hall of the Dead unbidden, and she was uncertain how to attract his attention from outside, for there was no knocker or bell on the great door. The mechanism which controlled it, however, either did not depend on the person inside, or could be so set as to work independently, for as she reached the threshold some concealed spring was put into operation and the door opened before her as usual. Still standing on the threshold, she was about to enter, when she stopped as though turned into stone.

Inside the hall she saw Julius March kneeling before one of the mummy-cases—the mummy-case of a woman. His head rested against the knees of the image, and his body was shaken by great sobs.

Amazed, moved by the strange sight, Annette turned and fled to her own room. Behind her the door of the Hall of the Dead swung noiselessly into its frame.

A WEEK later, Annette entered the little-used drawing-room of Professor March's house shortly before seven o'clock in the evening, and sat down near the bright fire ready to receive his guests. For March was giving one of his rare dinner-parties.

A few moments later the door opened, and the servant ushered in Attorney Sturges and a friend of his, a pleasant, rather simple-looking man named Sims.

"I fear we are a little early, Miss Grey," said Sturges, when he had presented his friend.

"Not at all," Annette replied easily. "Professor March asked me to make his excuses to you; he was detained at the British Museum and only arrived a few minutes ago. He is dressing, and will be down in a few minutes. Meanwhile, I must play hostess."

"And most adequately," murmured Sturges, with old-fashioned courtesy.

Then, as the door closed behind the servant, he spoke rapidly:

"We came a little early on purpose," he explained. "You are prepared, Miss Vane?"

"Quite," said the girl calmly.

"Good. Inspector Sims agrees with me that if we are ever to discover the mystery of your sister's disappearance, it will be tonight. Sims has been practising his part, and does it admirably."

The Scotland Yard man smiled.

"I think I can play it," he said. "And I congratulate you, Miss Vane, on the way you have handled the matter. This idea is an excellent one, and I admit I should never have thought of it myself. I hope, too," he went on, without the slightest alteration in his tone, as a step sounded outside and the door opened, "that Professor March will not deny me a peep at the wonderful treasures he keeps here."

"Why, of course not," cried March heartily, as he entered the room. "I caught your last words, Mr. Sims," he went on, "—for I am sure you are Sturges' psychic friend—and I shall be delighted to show you round my little museum. Well, Sturges, I must apologize to you both for keeping you waiting like this; but you have been in good hands."

He bowed courteously to Annette.

"It is very good of you, Mr. Sims," he went on, "to come and visit a recluse like this. Sturges has told me of your powers of necromancy, and I confess I am hoping to see something very wonderful."

The words were polite and were uttered with perfect civility, but the old lawyer laughed gently.

"It's no good, March," he said; "you cannot quite get the true ring. You scientific fellows always scoff at the unseen, and decline to believe anything that cannot be set down in writing, like an algebraic equation."

"Not at all," replied the Professor, with sudden gravity. "On the contrary, my researches have convinced me that there are mysteries to which, if we only had the clue—but we'll talk of that later," he added, with a sudden change of tone. "My first duty, as your host, is to feed you; come and help me perform the sacred rite of hospitality."

Laughing, he opened the door and bowed Annette to the head of the little procession to the dining-room, where they were presently seated round a candle-lit table of richly-polished mahogany.

It was a strange dinner-party, at which two, at least, of the diners found it difficult to appreciate the sallies of the host. Mr. Sims, however, expanded under the influence of the Professor's geniality. March was in unusually high spirits, for he had just succeeded in translating a hieroglyphic inscription which had defeated the Museum authorities, and he devoted himself to the sport of drawing out his psychic guest with a delicate irony which, to do him justice, never passed the bounds of good taste.

The innocent Mr. Sims responded to this subtle flattery with a readiness which delighted the Professor, and even Annette and the lawyer could not refrain from smiling at the naiveté with which Sims played his part.

At last the dinner drew to a close, and March rose.

"I am not going to let you off, Mr. Sims," he said. "I am eager to learn something of the methods of the modern spiritualists, for I admit I am more familiar with those of the past. But I think we ought to have a more suitable atmosphere for the *seance*," he added, chuckling. "Miss Grey, I hope you will not leave us? I think my Egyptian room would form an admirable background for Mr. Sims' experiments."

Annette smiled, with something of an effort, and led the way to the Hall of the Dead.

Despite himself, Sims could not repress an exclamation of awe at the sight of the great, gloomy room, with its solemn figures and mysterious shadows.

The Professor rubbed his hands, well pleased at the effect he had produced.

"Now, Mr. Sims," he said, "here is a carved chair on which a Pharaoh once sat. Enthroned yourself there. We will sit, metaphorically, at your feet, and listen to what you are pleased to tell us."

Sims bowed, but did not return the Professor's smile. Gravely he seated himself in the heavy wooden chair, rested his elbow on one of the quaintly-carved arms, and let his head sink onto his hand. The others grouped themselves near and waited, in a heavy silence.

Sensitive to impressions, the Professor's gay mood faded gradually into a tense expectancy that made his long fingers work nervously. He startled as Sims' voice broke the silence sharply.

"I am aware, Professor March," said Sims in a hard, level tone that startled his hearers, "that you are a skeptic."

The Professor murmured something, but Sims went on, without heeding him.

"I feel tonight that I am going to prove to you that I can see things that are hidden. . . ."

He paused, and again the silence was broken only by the sound of heavy breathing. As suddenly as before, Sims spoke again:

"Listen!" he said. "I see a great room, half lit by a lamp in the roof. There is a brighter light near a table in the center of the room. It is a stone table, such as was used in ancient Egypt by the embalmers."

The Professor drew in his breath with a sharp gasp, but the voice went steadily on:

"Beside the table I see a man. He is bending over something—something white. It is the body of a woman—"

"Stop, damn you!" screamed the Professor; and Sims, springing from his chair, took something from the pocket of his dinner-jacket.

The Professor laughed discordantly—the laugh of a madman.

"Put up your pistol," he cried. "You will not need it. I don't know who you are, and, damn you, I don't care! Do you hear that? *I don't care!* Listen, all of you; listen, I say! Today I have completed my task; I have learned the secret which I have sought so patiently. I am going to join my Princess, my Hora."

He ceased, and threw his arms out in a great gesture to the mummy-case in front of which he had been standing. Huge drops of sweat stood out on his forehead, and he tore open his linen collar with a madman's strength. But it was in a controlled, almost tender voice that he went on:

"Listen to me, and I will tell you a wonderful thing. Countless years ago I—I who speak to you here tonight—was a priest in Egypt. I was vowed to the service of Isis. But one day there came to the temple, where I ministered, a woman. A woman? Nay, a goddess! A being of such beauty that my heart leaped within me at the sight of her loveliness.

"She was the Princess Hora. We loved. Ten thousand words could say no more. But an evil fate tore her from me; the Pharaoh had seen her, and coveted her. Sooner than lie in his foul embrace she plunged a dagger into her white bosom. . . ."

He paused, and for a few moments covered his face with his hands, his shoulders quivering. Then he tore his hands away and stretched them once more toward the painted image that looked so calmly down at him.

"Hora, my Hora!" he cried passionately. "I have sought thee for centuries, through age after age. And now, at last thou hast come to me—and gone again. But only for a little while, a few brief moments, for I follow thee tonight."

Again he paused, and again he resumed, mastering his emotion:

"She came to me here, here in this house, where I have labored so long, striving to regain my knowledge of that past which is sometimes so clear, and sometimes, O Isis, so terribly dark! She came to me, my beautiful Hora; came clad in the garb of today, bearing the name of Beatrice."

A low sob broke from Annette, but he went on, unheeding:

"I told you, Hora, I *tried* to tell you—but your eyes were filmed by the gods. You could not understand. . . . You spurned me. Then it was that I understood that for us there could be only one way. One touch of this little knife, steeped in a poison so deadly that your soul had flown ere your body had fallen into my arms.

"Tenderly I bathed you and poured into your veins the secret essences that keep the flesh firm and fair as in life, and bore you to the tomb where you sit, waiting for me. But in another world, Hora, you wait for me, a thousand times more beautiful, and knowing that I, your lover, have sought you and found you at last. Hora, *I come!*"

With a wild cry, he raised the little dagger which he had drawn from his pocket. Sims sprang forward, but before he could reach him Professor Julius March had buried it in his heart. Hardly had the blade touched his flesh than he swayed, stumbled and crashed down at the feet of the mummy-case.

For a moment the others gazed at the prostrate form. Then Inspector Sims sprang forward and fumbled with trembling fingers at the fasten-

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ings of the mummy-case. Suddenly the front fell forward, and Annette uttered a terrible cry.

In the case, thus revealed, sat the girl who had been Beatrice Vane. She was nude, the chaste beauty of her lovely form standing out against the dark interior of the case. So wonderfully had the madman done his work that no scar marred the grace of the firm bosom, the long, rounded limbs, the head set proudly on the ivory neck. She sat as might have sat the Princess Hora, had she so wished, beside the Pharaoh himself on his Egyptian throne.

Sims drew back and bowed his head reverently as Annette, stumbling forward, laid her head on her dead sister's knees in a grief too terrible for tears.