

WEIRD TALES

THE UNIQUE MAGAZINE

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*A Man's Frightful Adventure
in an Ancient Tomb*

The INCUBUS

By HAMILTON CRAIGIE

FEAR beset Gerald Marston at the very moment of his entry into the chamber—an intense, gripping horror which laid an icy hand upon his forehead and fingers of a damp coldness about his heart.

It was as if one invisible from within had reached forth to make him prisoner to its atmosphere, which, heightened physically by the slimy walls, the velvet darkness, and the ceaseless, slow dripping of liquid upon stone, chilled his soul with a nameless foreboding, a daunting menace of unutterable dread.

And yet that Something, as he told himself, was behind him—his victim, the man whom he had killed.

Even now It walked, rather, upon the surface of the oily night, felt, but unseen, driving him forward inexorably, pitilessly—so that now he stood in the entrance to this lesser blackness, his huge bulk shaking in an anguish of uncertainty but one degree removed from the panic which had ridden him until, at length, distraught and near to madness, he had stumbled into this subterranean oubliette in his frantic flight.

It seemed a week since he, together with Professor Pillsbury, had descended into this whispering labyrinth of tombs—long galleries of Aztec construction vying in completeness with the catacombs of early Rome—sinuous corridors crossing and re-crossing in

a maze of underground warrens of apparently interminable extent.

It had been the Professor himself, an archaeologist whose devotion to his calling amounted almost to an obsession, who had suggested the exploration—nay, insisted on it—and had he, in his singleness of purpose, remembered that it had been Marston, his friend, who had, as it were, with a very triumph of casualness, implanted in his mind the first tiny seed of suggestion.

Scarcely a month before Marston had felicitated his friend upon the latter's engagement to Lucille Westley, beautiful and imperious, but there had been death in his heart. Perhaps, however, he had fancied, with the perverted hope which had grown in his heart like a green and pallid flame of lust, that, given his chance, he might have possessed this incomparable creature for his own.

And so, like a destroying fire, his obsession had mounted until, with the cunning of his twisted brain, he had evolved a plan, or, rather, deep within his consciousness, had spawned a thought: foul, slimy, furtive—even to himself half-born—an abortion, in truth, and yet . . .

AS THEY had passed from the clean sunlight into the Stygian darkness of the cavern, somehow, unbidden, there had arisen in Marston's mind an echo of the classroom—a fugitive whisper which, he could have

sworn, took on suddenly the form and substance of mocking speech: "*Facilis decensus Averni*," it whispered in his ear, as in a dim current of the whispering wind.

Marston had brought with him a ball of stout twine as a necessary precaution in threading the uncharted deeps of the underground corridors. This he had knotted firmly in a clove hitch (for Marston had been a sailor). There could have been no fear of its working loose, and less danger of its fraying out against the rough walls of the passageways, since at all times it would be loosely held. Like a thin snake, it spread itself behind them, and like a snake. . . .

The accident had been impossible to foresee. He had known that it could not happen; and yet. . . .

The Professor, leading the way with lantern held well aloft, had exclaimed aloud at the vivid beauty of a stalactite in his path, adjacent to a broad, deep ledge some three feet in height.

"Ah, Gerald!" he had cried. "It is alive—it writhes with motion—observe how it has grown, layer upon layer of smooth perfection! And the ledge—a perfect replica of an ancient sarcophagus! Look—"

But he was destined never to complete the speech.

For with the words he stumbled—a bight of the line snaked out to coil around his ankle—tottered, even as from behind him something moved, flashed, descended upon his head—something cold and hard. He fell, with a sodden crash, face downward in the mold.

And with his fall the lantern crashed to the floor of the cavern, sputtered a moment feebly in a brief spark of life, and then died abruptly. And at the feet of Marston that which had been sentient, alive, now lay still and motionless in the dust.

Marston stood for a moment, with groping fingers extended into the void about him; his head sang, his eyes blurred. The velvet black became sud-

denly, as it were, endowed with life and movement, mysterious, whispering. Near at hand there sounded abruptly a horrible, fetid panting—a gross intake of whistling breath which, in a sudden, overmastering panic, he did not recognize as his own labored breathing.

"God!" he cried, insanely, and then, in panic-struck terror at the sound of his voice, fell silent and stood shivering like a frightened horse.

With fumbling fingers he felt in his pockets and produced a box of matches, finally, after many attempts, lighting one which he held tremblingly above his head. He did not glance at the figure at his feet, but over and beyond it, where his shadow, monstrous and grotesque, seemed flung headforemost into a shallow niche, within which there rested a flat slab of rock perhaps three feet in height.

To his distorted imagination the sudden suggestion seemed filled with a vague menace—as if the brooding shadow of death had reached forth to touch, to summon, to beckon with an imperious, chill finger there in that stifling abode of changeless dark.

Abruptly, as the quick flame ate downward to his finger-tips, he made a short, backward step—stumbled—and the box fell from his nerveless hand, the match winked out, and at one stride the dominion of the dark enveloped him.

He bent swiftly, with frantic fingers searching in the mold, scratching, clawing in a fever of anxiety.

He found—nothing. Then, as if impelled from behind by an inexorable Force, he began to run, stumbling, falling, bruising himself against the sharp, unseen angles of the passageway along which he fled. . . .

Time had merged into an eternity of physical pain and mental torture, of corroding fear which left him in a sweat of agony as he fared onward in his blundering flight. The sense of direction which in the pitch black-

ness renders the familiar outlines of one's very bed-chamber strangely distorted—this had become confused in his first headlong rush away from the scene of that which was branded upon his heart in letters of fire.

Now, in his warped and twisted brain the germ of a thought grew, expanded, flowered abruptly in an insane cacophony of sound.

A laugh, reedy, discordant, cackling echoed in his ears, beginning in a low chuckle, then rising all about him in a furious stridor of sound. It was as if the demons of the place were welcoming him to their midst as one worthy of their company.

Again he fell prone, groveling in the mold in an ecstasy of terror at the unrecognizable mouthings which issued from his throat. But even as his insanity peopled the void about him with shapes of terror, in especial the hideous Shape which he knew even now followed him, he got somehow to his feet, arose, and lurched headlong into a recess in the rocky corridor, which would have been familiar could he have but beheld it even in the brief flaring of a match.

It was then that he heard the ceaseless, slow dripping that smote him afresh with an indescribable, crawling fear, beside which his previous insane panic had been as nothing. For a moment he heard also a gibbering—a squeaking, a rustle which with his coming ceased abruptly in a faint shadow of sound. For the moment, he could have sworn that a slinking, furtive, something, unbelievably swift, had brushed past his leg, touched him lightly as with the faint, fugitive contact of a dead, wind-blown leaf.

That slow, continuous dripping—too well he knew its meaning, or thought that he did. And in the same breath he became aware of the place in which he stood—recognized it for what it was even in the enveloping blackness.

At any other time he would have known that measured dripping for what it was: the curiously suggestive rhythm of the stalactite's slow drip-drip, like the sluggish dripping of blood.

In his headlong flight, cleaving an unimagined depth of Cimmerian darkness, through which it seemed he was breathing the oily tide of a dim nightmare of viscid flood, all sense of direction had been completely lost.

Now, as he stood, within this fearsome catacomb, of a sudden he stumbled, knelt, put forward a groping hand, and then recoiled with a windy shriek—as his shaking fingers encountered the clammy surface of a human face!

HE HAD returned, willy nilly, as it seemed, to the body of his victim. It was the face of Pillsbury, cold, clammy, silent, unresponsive.

Doomed! He was doomed, then, to kneel there, in that groping blackness of this frightful charnel—alone, yet prisoner to that silent figure—forever to hear that ceaseless dripping, regular as the beating of a heart, of a heart that was stilled forever, yet strangely pulsing in its slow drip-drip—inexorable, insistent, ever louder, as it seemed—rising in a veritable thunder against the low-hung curtain of the dark.

Trembling, urging his will by the severest effort he had ever known, in a sudden lucid interval he passed an exploring hand over the rigid outlines of the body, which lay, as upon a bier, on a sort of rocky shelf, perhaps three feet in height, just level with his shoulders as he bent before it. But it had not been there before! When he had left it in his overmastering panic it had been lying, face downward in the mold!

But it did not occur to him to question its position: the strange significance of the fact affected him not at all, for, curiously enough, with the contact there came a measure of re-

assurance: the Thing which had been Pillsbury, his friend—the Thing which he had left behind—had not been following him; it had existed merely in his coward imagination. Or, if it had hunted him through the maze of corridors, it was now returned to its chosen resting-place. There it was. under his hand!

It was absurd to think that he had been followed, for dead men did not walk, save in dreams, and he had returned to prove that it lay where he had left it, silent, cold, incapable of movement without volition.

On his hands and knees, his questing fingers, tracing the rigid outline of the limbs, came suddenly upon a length of line, knotted about the ankle. Ah!

Feverishly he felt about him in the blackness, clawing forward on hands and knees. Yes, the line ran clear, unbroken, away from the niche. He was saved!

In his sudden revulsion, he gave way to primitive emotion—he chuckled, moaned, cried, wept, laughed in a horrible travesty of mirth.

Like a drowning man, he seized upon it with clutching fingers as if by some sudden magic he might be drawn, on the instant, out of this labyrinth of black terror which was eating into his soul with the corroding bite of an acid. For at the other end of that thin thread lay sunlight and life and liberty. He held that within his shaking grasp which was in truth a life-line, a tenuous yet certain means of safety, of escape from a death, the grisly face of which had but a moment before leered at him out of the tomblike depths.

In his eagerness to be gone, he straightened from his kneeling posture with a convulsive movement, his fingers holding the line, jerked it violently, and, before he could rise, there came a rustle, a thud, and a suffocating weight descended upon his back. As he fell, face downward in the mold, he squeaked like a rat as,

out of the dark, two hands went round his neck and clawlike talons encircled his throat.

Curiously alive they seemed, and yet—with his own hand he had accounted for that life. It was not possible—no, it could not be!—it was unthinkable. . . .

For a space he lay, inert, passive, but, notwithstanding his terror, his fingers still clutching the line, spread out before him in the blackness. Presently, when his panic had somewhat abated, when he found that he was still alive, unharmed, by slow stages of tremendous effort he rose to his knees, tottering under the Incubus upon his back.

Now that he knew what it was, after an interval he attempted to disengage the fingers about his neck, but he could not. He found that grip rigid, unyielding. Like a bar of iron, it resisted his utmost efforts.

It was as if a Will, implacable, inexorable, had informed those stiffened talons with purpose; it was as if the last sentient effort of an Intelligence had, by some supernatural quality, bequeathed to those fingers a message, a command to be performed. *Rigor mortis*—that was it—the unbreakable hold of those implacable fingers: Pillsbury's vengeful fingers, reaching out even after death, in a dreadful cincture of doom!

But Marston rose slowly to his feet, staggering, swaying beneath that frightful burden whose fingers wrenched by a superhuman effort from his neck, bit into his shoulders like hooks of steel.

"God!" he mumbled, again, in an unconscious travesty—a hideous burlesque of supplication.

It was the end, then. Weakened as he was, his nerves a jangle of discordant wires, his mind a chaos of bemused and frantic thought, he stood, helpless, swaying, foredone, beaten, trapped by the insensate clay of his own making.

No longer a man but a beast, his brain wiped free of every thought but the blind, unreasoning impulse to live, like an animal he drew, from some unsuspected physical reservoir within him, the strength to proceed.

Tottering, swaying, he reverted to the brute, and, with the dumb, inhuman impulsion of the brute, roweling even his apelike strength to superhuman effort, he continued to advance, falling at times, and rising as with the last spent effort of a runner at the tape, yet somehow going on and on, feeling his way along that thin thread whose other end, miles distant, centuries away, stretched into the ether of Heaven!

In a nightmare of suffocating blackness, shot through at times with the red fires of the Pit, he fared onward, and now he saw, with a sudden, agonized return to the perception of the human, that those fires were all about him. They were Eyes, venomous, hateful, red with the lust of unholy anticipation. . . .

He heard about him the slither of gaunt bodies, the patter of innumerable feet—rats they were, but of an unconscionable size, huge and voracious, such as infested this underground kingdom of the dead.

While he moved he knew that they would not attack him. While he lived, even without movement, he believed that he was safe.

But why had they refrained from that which he had given them to feast upon, the Thing which even now flapped about him, the inanimate yet strangely animate shell which he had transformed at a stroke from life to death, its legs striking against his as he moved, as if to urge him onward, rowel him forward as in a race with death?

The sounds that he had heard, the squeaks, the gibbers—as of ghouls disturbed at a ghastly rendezvous—could there have been any significance in these? Somewhere he had heard of drunken miners, asleep in the deep

levels of coal, brought to a sudden, horrid awakening by cold lips nuzzling cheek or neck, but his brain considered this dully, if at all.

An odd hallucination began to possess him; dimly he dreamed that his dreadful burden was alive, but unconscious, insentient. But he knew that it was an hallucination.

He would make no immediate effort to rid himself of the Thing he carried—not now, at any rate. When he became stronger he would bury it, hide it. Years might pass—perhaps a chance party might discover in one of the innumerable corridors a moldering skeleton—but the body of his guilt would be a *corpus delicti*—there could be no conviction without evidence, and no murder without a victim produced as of due process of law.

But in a moment it seemed this thought gave place to the overmastering panic terror of escape. Instinct alone held him to his course. If there had been light one might have seen the foam which gathered on his lips, the glassy stare of his eyes.

Again he fell, and this time he fancied that the narrowing circle had drawn nearer. Even to his dulled brain he was aware of an intelligent rapacity in those burning eyes, an anticipation which sprang from knowledge.

Somehow, once more, he rose upright, after a multiplied agony of straining effort, but he felt, deep within his consciousness, that he was but a puppet in the hands of a ruthless fate, doomed to wander forever under his detestable load.

Of a sudden, also, an illumination, like a fiery sword, cut through the dulled functioning of his intelligence: the beast that was Marston reeled with the suggestion that penetrated the surface of his physical coma.

What if the line he followed led, not into the clean brightness of the outer air, but, by some frightful mischance, still further into the womb of

the hills, deeper and deeper into oblivion, down and down into the uttermost hell of one's imagining?

In the flux and reflux of images which had taken the place of coherent thought he saw all this, he felt it to be a possibility, and with the terror of the brute he strove once more to rid himself of this insensate tyrant, this incubus which rode him, roweling his sides with grotesquely dangling feet, spurring him on in a mad welter of fear and pain from which he could not escape.

But it was useless. Try as he would, he could not disengage that grip of steel, and thewed mightily as he was, he found that every last ounce of his great strength was needed to go on. He was just weak enough to render futile any effort to dislodge those clinging fingers, and just strong enough to continue his progress, like a mole in the dark—and that was all.

He must go on and on until flesh and blood could endure no more, the victim of his own contriving, the veritable bond-slave of his passionate soul. And when at length he should fall, no more to rise, then would come, not swift oblivion, but death, indeed, lingering, horrible, unthinkable, even for a beast. . . .

TIME had ceased, feeling had ceased; thought remained only in the faint spark which glowed somewhere within him, flickering now, glowing at the core of his being even as about him there narrowed the fell circle of the blazing eyes.

Slap—slap—shuffle—slap. . . . With the infinite slowness of exhaustion, his feet moved, dragged, went forward, while ever at his back those other lifeless feet rose and fell in a grotesque travesty of life, of movement, spurring forward his all but fainting soul.

Dimly he perceived that the floor upon which he moved had taken an upward trend; he felt the line go suddenly taut; then, abruptly, before

him, for a single instant, a pale glimmer flickered and died as from dim leagues of distance.

Summoning the last remnant of his strength, he began to run, or thought that he did, but in reality he moved by inches, and by inches the faint glimmer grew, expanded, broadened to a luminous grayness.

Stumbling, slipping, swaying from side to side, the sight of that pale shadow of the day intoxicated him with a feverish exultation, despite the weakness which seemed to dissolve his being to water. He was saved.

By a last, titanic effort, a tremendous wrenching of the will, he fell rather than staggered into the outer air—beheld, with lack-lustre eyes, the ring of faces about him, all staring eyes and white lips and working faces.

Then he sank abruptly to his knees as eager hands relieved him of his burden. He heard voices, meaningless, yet filled with meaning. . . .

He fell instantaneously down a long stairway to the deep, enveloping mercy of unconsciousness.

PRESENTLY, after a timeless interval, he opened his eyes, and then closed them again, blinking owlishly at the strong sunlight. He heard a voice, incoherent, babbling, which, after a moment, he recognized as his own:

"The stalactite—it was the stalactite that killed him, I tell you. . . . It was an accident—an accident. . . ."

He rolled his eyes wildly from right to left; and at what he saw a strangled, mad cry of sudden comprehension—of understanding—issued from his throat ere the thick veil of a retributive insanity descended upon him forever:

"The rats. . . . knew. . . ."

Before him, his face death-white, his hands scarred from the rough stone up which he had clawed to the

rocky shelf, a clean bandage about his forehead, was the face of Pillsbury. In that brief instant, like a lightning flash, illumination seared into the brain of Marston, and, by its very white-hot intensity, shriveled it to the dust of a gibbering madness:

The drunken sleep of the miners. . . .
The nibbling of the rats. . . .
Pillsbury's awakening to conscious-

ness. . . . His instinctive, *upward* effort to escape to the ledge from which, with the half-conscious, and then wholly conscious grip that would not be denied, he had fallen upon Marston. . . .

Potential murderer that he was, Marston himself, by a poetic irony of justice, had been the unwitting savior of his intended victim!