

WEIRD TALES *The Unique Magazine*

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THE ROOM OF THE BLACK VELVET DRAPES

By B. W. SLINEY

IT WAS a miserable night to be out of doors.

Overhead the heavy clouds hung low, reflecting back the myriad lights of the city with a lurid glow, imparting an air of deep oppression. No breath of air stirred; it was deathly still, yet one had the feeling that it was but the calm before the impending storm. A smoky fog blurred the street lights and made the atmosphere still more oppressive.

Now and then a lone pedestrian or cab came out of the midst, passed, and was again swallowed by the shadows. It was, indeed, a surly night, and one that honest men stepped into with misgiving.

But as chance and my occupation would have it, that evening I was obliged to wade through the murky blackness to the home of Ormond Wier, the renowned psychologist. Another cheerless prospect, for Wier was known to be rather eccentric. However, editors are dictatorial persons, and mine, though a warm personal friend, demanded his stories when they were due.

I had been requested to interview Wier for the next number of the magazine. It was only through the greatest diplomacy that I succeeded in arranging an appointment with Wier at all, so I suppose that I should have gone with eager step to fulfill the engagement. But somehow, I could not feel enthused about it. Perhaps it was the weather. Or perhaps it was a foreboding—

I chose to walk to his home, thinking that the fresh air might do me good and cheer me up a bit. Reaching Wier's mansion with a few minutes to spare, I remained on the opposite side of the street and studied it. It stood on a corner and loomed up against the reflecting clouds like an immense blot of ink, sombre, mysterious, even sinister. For some unaccountable reason it had a dome, and the whole was dominated by that huge half-round shape. All in all, it was a dismal old place, and I never had occasion to pass it, even in the daytime, without a slight chill running up and down

my spine, causing me to walk a trifle faster.

From afar, the eight o'clock chimes boomed through the heavy air. It was the hour of the appointment.

I crossed the street and rang the bell, the feeling of dread more pronounced than ever. The door opened and I stepped inside, prepared to give my card to the butler.

But no butler was there; I stood alone in a long, high-ceiled, richly-furnished corridor. Slightly perturbed, I watched the door swing shut, and stood for a moment wondering what I should do.

Only a moment did I stand, for presently a door at the end of the corridor opened, and Wier, whom I had met before, stepped into the room.

"Good evening," he greeted me, with a pleasant smile. "I was expecting you. Come into my study where we can talk undisturbed."

Making some conventional reply, I followed him into a smaller hall, and from thence to a narrow, dimly-lighted passage. Many other passages exactly similar there were, branching off to the right and left, and Wier led me from one to another in a most confusing manner. They formed a veritable labyrinth, dark and damp, and increased my moroseness tenfold. At last, after a seemingly interminable period of walking, with Wier's massive head, which was strangely like the dome of his house, bobbing up and down before me, we came to a halt against a blank wall. Wier fumbled a moment and a panel slid noiselessly aside, and he stepped into a second and shorter passage, motioning for me to follow.

"My study," he said, swinging open a ponderous door at the end. "Step in."

I had never seen such a room before in all my life. The first impression was of vastness; the second, of simple magnificence. Only two pieces of furniture were in the room; a carved ebony table and an immense chair to match. On the table lay a single leather bound volume; nothing more.

And then, with a shock of surprise, I noticed that which lent to the study its air of vastness. The room was perfectly circular, and the entire surface of the walls were hung with rich black velvet draperies. Up and up they extended, past the hanging bowls of lights; past into the shadows, and one imagined that he could faintly see them end in a dome at the top.

At equal distances about the room stood ancient Egyptian sarcophagi, grim and mystical. A silence pervaded; a silence as heavy and deep as the velvet drapes around the room; a silence so dense that it could be felt; so intense that even the breathing of Wier and multiplied upon itself until it resembled the beating of a tom-tom. Then the re-myself sounded like the whistling of wind in a chimney. The slightest stir verberations would die away, and once more the deathly quiet would reign.

"My study," repeated Wier, a pardonable note of pride in his voice. "Be seated while I get another chair. This room is absolutely sound proof; you will not be disturbed."

He withdrew. The door closed behind him, and the curtain he had been holding aside swished into place.

I was alone.

I WILL confess that I did not like it. The unhuman carvings on the sarcophagi grinned malignantly at me, and the silence fairly shrieked its possession of the room.

Nervously, I walked across a luxurious plush rug of deep maroon to the center of the room and sat down to await the return of Wier. He was taking needlessly long to return with that chair.

I picked up and glanced through the solitary volume. It was Wier's work, "The Human Mind"—the most amazing psychological treatise ever penned. To it Wier owed his fame, and to it I owed my presence in his mysterious house. I was familiar with the book—a fantastic piece of work, not intended to allay despondency. I replaced it.

Still Wier did not return, and still the gloomy shadows and intense silence filled the place. If I looked up, the graven images on the sarcophagi stared at me; if I glanced downward, carved ebony imps on the table legs scowled arrogantly. Every detail seemed to have some hidden meaning, some strange influence, and every detail set my nerves on edge.

Deciding that moving about would be better than sitting still, I examined a sarcophagus. It was the genuine thing, carved from rich red porphyry, and it pleased me not to find an imitation amid the severe splendor of the study. I walked from one to another, examining them all. Twelve there were, each seeming more marvelous than the one before.

At the twelfth I hesitated longer than usual, noting every detail. It was a masterpiece in terra cotta, rare, and surely worth a small fortune. Then slowly, but ever stronger, like the growth of a temptation, came the question—"Is it empty?"

A morbid desire to learn seized me and played havoc with my already overwrought sensibilities. I would peek within. I raised the lid slightly—shoved it back hurriedly. A feeling of nausea overcame me; my knees weakened and I trembled feebly. A body was in the case, but—it was not a mummy.

I returned to the table in a trance. Why didn't Wier come? All my former melancholy gave away to fear. What signified these unholy things in this strange man's house? Were all the mummy cases so occupied?

The latter question took the form of an obsession. I felt that I *must* learn, and yet I feared to investigate further. But at length dread was overcome; I went to the fifth case, raised the lid—was confronted by the same gruesome sight. A human body was within, but the features were modern.

The body was not mummified, but metal-plated, and it shimmered with a silver-like luster. It was not a cast, not a carving. The expression was too ghastly real for that. The face was that of an American; the features, contorted shockingly, gave evidence of great mental anguish before death.

How came Wier to possess these? What were his aims? What kept him away so long? These and a multitude of similar questions surged through my agitated brain.

I was now wholly resigned to fear, and I believe that I was perilously near the verge of madness. The deathly quiet; the sarcophagi with their grim burdens; the sable curtains; and again the quiet.

I fled to the table and cried out, but the echo reverberated so uproariously and sounded so unreal that I stopped short, and dared not repeat the experiment. I buried my head in my arms for a few minutes, striving vainly to compose my shattered thoughts. But I was powerless. Some sinister, overwhelming force seemed to take hold of my will and juggle it without mercy.

I felt that I must move about; do something. I glanced up, cried out in dismay. The twelfth sarcophagus had vanished! With wildly pounding heart I counted them to make sure. One, two, three . . . ten, eleven . . . The twelfth had utterly disappeared; yet the silence had not been broken, nor had anyone entered the room.

Where *was* Wier? What infamous hoax was he trying to put off on me?

My mind wandered. I was unable to think clearly or to direct my thoughts. That fifth mummy case—had it vanished, too? No, it had not moved, but—most peculiar—the cold stone eyes of the carved cover gleamed wickedly. Yet they attracted . . . like eyes of a snake . . . they beckoned.

And I responded.

WHEN I stood before the case the eyes gleamed no longer. Fool! Thus to allow my imagination to run riot with me because the night was stormy and I was in a strange room! Perhaps I had even imagined that the twelfth case had disappeared. I turned. It stood in its proper place, but its graven face seemed to leer disconcertingly.

I now felt that all had been a trick of my fancy. Of course the huge old coffins were empty! Courage surged up within me, dispelling my terror. I would prove to myself my hallucination.

I drew aside the cover of the fifth sarcophagus, boldly this second time. Suddenly my body went nerveless; I stood dumbfounded, paralyzed. The cover of the sarcophagus slipped from my senseless fingers and shattered on the floor with a crash that I vaguely noticed. And, like it, all my regained control, all my restored confidence fell from me, leaving me more enervated than ever; my reason further gone.

There, in the sarcophagus, instead of unoccupied space, or at worst, metal-plated body, stood Wier, his face contorted fearfully, his eyes gleaming with frightful luster. He laughed diabolically and stepped out. The echoes flung the ungodly sound about the room with horrible realism.

Mechanically, I retreated a few paces.

Wier advanced toward me, I again fell back.

"Fool!" he hissed, "you came to seek a story! To learn how I study the mind! To give it to a blatant press! You shall learn! But never will you see your story in print. You will become a part of the tale, but—you will not be able to write it. Look! Here is your story!"

He strode across the room and pulled a cord. The hanging velvets parted and revealed a door of solid bronze. Wier threw it open, but there remained several doors of wood. At last he reached a heavy iron grating, unlocked it, and threw it open also. Then he seated himself in the carved ebony chair, facing the portals he had swung aside.

"Come here," he commanded, "or my creatures will tear you to bits. Here is one now . . ."

I did not relish the vision Wier pictured, so I stepped to his side. In fact, I was quite powerless to do aught but obey, regardless of what my sentiments might have been.

"Look!"

Out of the door came—a creature. It had once been a woman, a beautiful woman. But now her reason was gone; her face was blank and expressionless; dull were her eyes and listless her step. She advanced nearly to the table.

Then, catching sight of Wier, she became a creature transformed. Hatred flamed in her eyes and she assumed a menacing attitude. She crouched as if to spring at him. He laughed hellishly, clapping his hands sharply together. The woman wilted and crept away.

"Once my wife," said Wier leeringly, swaying back and forth in his huge chair. "But I have taught her to hate me. It is the only emotion she possesses, for I have pruned away all the others, and when she does not hate, she does nothing."

I shuddered.

Another of his puppets came into the room. I watched with fascinated dread. A middle aged man he was, but his actions had the same listless character as those of the first victim. This one, however, when he noticed Wier, fell into the most abject terror, and uttering shriek after shriek, fled from the study.

"Fear," explained Wier, "and once my butler. Now you understand why I have a soundproof study."

Others came. Love, who fawned all over the beast; Pride, who deigned not to notice him; Joy, a clever fool had not his case been so tragic, laughed merrily and capered for the demon; Greed, who scrambled piteously for a few pennies; the mournful resignation of Despair; the buoyant effervescence of Happiness

—all were there, an atrocious sacrifice for every emotion of Man; all faded back into a hopeless lethargy at the sound of Wier's abominable voice and the sharp clap of his hands.

Wier played with them a long time, absorbed apparently with his observations, but in reality watching the effect of his experiment on me. He sat back in his chair, a huge, powerfully built man, nearly filling it. His motions were quick, catlike. His massive head bespoke a great intellect; his face, almost lost in the piercing gleam of his eyes, reflected his thoughts as vividly as the faces of his insane puppets reflected their only emotion.

He turned to me and smiled. It was difficult to realize that the loathsome expression I now saw was framed by the same mouth that had greeted me so pleasantly an hour before. He was a veritable Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, so complete was his transformation.

"There is your story! And now for your part. You are qualified to take it; you have been preparing all evening. Yes! I have arranged everything. I knew when I first met you that you would be susceptible to my treatment. And I was right! The pending storm was an excellent prelude for your sensitive nature; the self-opening door disturbed you, for you did not seem to realize that it was merely controlled by an electrical device; the maze gave stimulus to your ready imagination. Then being left alone; the discovery of the bodies in the sarcophagi; the vanishing of one of the cases and its reappearance, made possible by having a trap underneath; a bit of hypnotic influence from me; finding me where you expected nothing; this review we have just been holding—all these things have been undermining your intellect.

"Why, man!" he pronounced the words vehemently, rapping sharply on the table as he uttered each syllable, as if to give added emphasis, "you are even now on the brink of insanity. You *shall* go insane, and then I will train your mind until it is an absolute blank. Then I intend to develop a new emotion within you—one unknown to Mankind! Most enlightening! You should feel honored, sir, that you are chosen. Come, are you ready to begin?"

"Let me go!" I shrieked in a frenzy. "Let me go!"

"Quiet! or I must get another sarcophagus. I preserve those who die—silver-plate them by a process I have evolved. Some die—those who cannot release their grip on their intellects, and those I preserve forever in recognition

of their wills. You, too, will die if you do not submit"

My brain was in a turmoil. Things spun dizzily before me, hazy fancies came to mind, irrelevant scenes flashed through my brain. But up out of this chaos of ideas a thought struggled to the surface.

"The police," I said hoarsely, but with a new note of hope in my voice, "I will be missed!"

Wier smiled again his evil, triumphant smile.

"Yes, but you will be found. Tomorrow, a body mutilated beyond recognition, with your clothes and papers, will be found in the river. And your friends will wonder how it happened, and attend your funeral with heavy hearts."

He stretched his hand toward me. I leaped back. His words had extinguished all hope, but I was determined not to submit to his evil designs without a struggle. I now recognized fully the power of this pitiless demon, and though I realized that I merely furthered his ends by attempting to keep from him and refusing to give up, I could not bring myself to put an end to it then and there. The vision of the bodies in the mummy cases was too vividly fresh in my mind. And, too, the desire to live, to be free, was still mine.

Wier started after me. Something seemed to snap in my brain, and my conscious self stepped from the body that was mine, and stood aside, wondering.

Wier advanced; my body retreated. He followed, slowly, stealthily, like a cat not quite sure of his prey.

"YOU will become a part of the story," he chanted over and over in a monotonous tone. "Your senses fail you; your emotions are fading! The castles of your mind—the emotions—they are breaking! They crumble . . . fall! I am the cause of the havoc! Ormond Wier! Acclaimed by men, and wrecker of their souls! You are forgetting . . . you are forgetting . . . forgetting . . ."

The monotone of his voice wearied me. I felt tired and exhausted. My retreat before Wier's steady advance became wholly automatic. I considered all he said, and decided he was right. I was going insane. My emotions—the castles of my mind—were falling away; decaying. Still my body ran, still my conscious self stood aside and watched with acute interest.

Every detail of those awful moments struck with photographic distinctness. The building quivered with tension; a strange vibration filled the air. Without thinking of it, I realized that it was

the spirit of the storm, broken at last. Still we circled about the room; still Wier chanted his monotonous words, and still he regarded me with that merciless fixed gaze of his.

"The castles of the mind! Reason! All the emotions! They crumble and fall"

"For God's sake!" I managed to gasp.

"God?" Wier stopped. "There is no God. If there were he would save you. He would have saved the others!" he concluded sneeringly, and took up his relentless pursuit once more. "The castles of the mind"

The strain was growing unbearable. With each passing second the tension in my brain grew greater. Little wonder! The gradual circling about the room, Wier's unceasing pursuit, the weird chant, his hypnotic gaze—all were the result of a carefully thought out plan; the result of experience and twelve failures—failures in which the happy victim had died!

"The castles of the mind they fall fall"

Still the atmosphere seemed charged with that strange vibration. But no murmur of the storm penetrated the study's soundproof walls; in my super-acute state I merely sensed it, and knew that the elements sympathized.

"Reason! All the emotions"

Suddenly Fear rushed into the room, crying apprehensively. Wier hesitated and paled slightly. The wretch stopped, glanced about the room wildly, and rushed terror-stricken to Wier's side.

Wier's fist smashed into the unfortunate's face. His cries ceased instantly; he staggered, struck me in falling. The slight jar was sufficient to send me reeling, so completely had the mental strain drained my physical strength. My legs doubled beneath me; I fell to the floor and rolled under the colossal table.

My moment had come. I prayed fervently and waited for the end with wildly palpitating heart.

The building shook to its very foundations. Without warning, the silence was split into a billion sounds. It seemed as if all the uproar of creation had been concentrated in that one room. I thought that it was the last . . . that the tumult marked the failing of my mind.

Bits of plaster showered on the table and rug about me. Larger pieces fell until it was a veritable rain of masonry. Wier cursed. The hanging lights crashed to the floor. The place was left in utter blackness. Slowly the plaster ceased to fall on the table above me, and gradually the room grew brighter. In the growing brilliance I could see Wier, stretched

almost at my side on the floor, inert and deathlike.

As I crawled from under the heavy table Wier's former wife entered the room. She spied him; became a demon! Stealthily she approached him. Others came after her. She fell upon him, tore at his throat; scratched his face; sank her teeth in his flesh

One by one her companions joined her, and only Love—blind, illusioned Love—fought for the beast. As I watched in a trance of terror, horrified, yet unable to prevent, Wier lost all human shape . . .

Retribution!

The study grew constantly brighter. Smoke filled the place. The costly velvet drapes were blazing columns of flames. The study was growing unbearably hot, too.

With a shock, I realized my danger—a new danger, no less awful than the one from which I had just escaped. Flam-

ing bits of wood and cloth fell about me. I rushed into the room where Wier had kept his puppets confined. No hope there; no windows, no doors.

I flew back to the fiery inferno and dashed about despairingly. I could not find the door!

Despair! Then hope, as Wier's words came back to me—"by simply having a trap underneath"—the twelfth sarcophagus!

I ran to it and shoved. It would not budge. Time after time I tried it, but with no success. The heat was scorching in its intensity, and the drapes were now roaring to the floor, masses of flame. The victims of Wier's flagrant crime were still fighting over him, indifferent to the heat. If one of the curtains should fall on me

I gave one mighty heave with the sudden strength of despair. The sarcophagus tottered, and fell. The panel upon

which it had been resting came up with it, revealing a black rectangular hole. I staggered on the edge a moment, dizzy with exertion. Then I plunged into the blackness.

DAYS PASSED before I regained my faculties—days in which I seemed to be forever falling. But it was many months before I fully recovered from the shock. It was not until then that I was told that lightning had struck the dome of Wier's home and set it on fire, and that firemen had stumbled on my body by merest chance. All of Wier's unfortunate victims perished in the sombre room of the black velvet drapes and the twelve sarcophagi. Perhaps it was for the best

But never will I, come what may, forget those few terrible hours when my emotions, the castles of my mind, were almost taken from me.