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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

# *The* Sealed Casket

By RICHARD F. SEARIGHT

*The icy fingers of a fetor that was old when the world was young reached for the life of the scheming Wesson Clark—a strange little story*

**F**OR nearly an hour Wesson Clark had been studying the sealed casket, his shrewd black eyes feasting avidly on its crudely carved metal contours. It lay before him in the pool of light from the desk lamp; the light which illumined his classic, calculating features with a pallid glow, while making a shadowy obscurity of the cavernous, book-lined study. Outside, the high March wind shrilled, and plucked with icy fingers at the cornices and gables of the old house. It gave Clark a pleasing, luxurious sense of security to relax in the overheated gloom

of the upstairs study and listen to the rising moan without. Careless, slipshod old Simpkins had gone for the night, after stoking the ancient furnace to capacity; and Clark was alone in the house, as he had wished to be for this occasion.

He smiled slightly and hummed a snatch from the latest Gershwin hit, as his gaze returned to his prize. The casket was small and compact, perhaps sixteen inches long by six or seven wide, and formed of a dull, age-tarnished metal that defied casual identification. The crude, writhing images carved into its sur-

face offered no aid to classification; Clark failed to assign them to any known period of early art.

A gratifying legacy to a connoisseur of antiques was this ancient box. Old Martucci had never suspected, then. There had been times when Clark had wondered—and feared—as he carried on his surreptitious affair with Martucci's youthful wife. Not that it mattered now—the sinister old scientist, with his perverted sense of humor, was dead; and Nonna, though filled as ever with Latin fire, seemed much less fascinating, now that legal barriers were removed. Also, she was growing a bit proprietary, a little too assured. Clark knew the signs. He smiled ironically as he studied the casket. While Martucci lived, Clark had cultivated his friendship and enjoyed the conquest of Nonna at stealthy assignations, employing the greatest caution. But now there was nothing to fear. For the moment, at least, he was surfeited with Nonna's charms; and he felt free to discard her as he saw fit, without the haunting dread of discovery and vengeance by the suspicious old archeologist. Besides, he needed freedom to reel in his new catch; one more alluring than the Italian girl had ever been, and endowed with a fortune that ran into almost mythical figures. His intentions were very serious here.

His smile deepened as he recalled the peculiar clause that formed a part of the codicil to the last testament of Martucci—the clause which was the instrument conveying the casket:

"And I do hereby bequeath to my one-time friend, Wesson Clark, the ancient coffer of Alû-Tor; and urge him only to leave the leaden seal thereon intact, as I have done for thirty years."

Clark chuckled softly. Martucci had been a naïve fool in spite of his dubious

reputation in scientific circles, where certain ruthless and unethical practises attributed to him were frowned on heavily. He had kept the seal intact, had he? And no guessing what rare treasures of antiquity might be hidden inside! He had spent his life delving in the earth and incidentally acquiring the meager fortune (now almost dissipated) with which he had retired, while, quite possibly, real wealth waited in the casket. But then, the Italian had been a strange character—one of those rare, incomprehensible creatures who appear to place little importance on the mere possession of money. The aggrandizement of his name in scientific discoveries, the search for the forbidden in hidden occult lore, the cynical study of human nature, had seemed to mean much more to him. Certainly he had never opened the casket, for the splotch of melted lead that sealed it was black with age and bore no signs of having been tampered with.

WITH all the leisurely indolence of his sybaritic nature, Clark lay back and gloated over his acquisition. He scrutinized more closely the cryptic, wavering symbols, vague and spidery, which had been impressed at some remote time on the leaden seal, no doubt while the metal was still hot. They were quite unfamiliar in that they resembled nothing he could recall having seen before; but there was something indefinably disturbing in their almost sentient lines. They brought to mind some utterly impossible *living* thing. He laughed at the absurdity of the impression.

But whatever they represented, the symbols were very old. Their primitive crudeness suggested an antiquity antedating the Phœnician alphabet, or even the Mayan inscriptions. Clark regretted his scanty knowledge of such things; for

here, he half suspected, might lie a specimen of the very first primal writing; the groping pictorial attempt to transcribe thought, from which had developed the earliest known written characters. He would preserve the seal intact and have it examined by an authority. Possibly it possessed a definite intrinsic value of its own. Martucci must have known: his knowledge of epigraphy had been profound, and it was whispered that all his developments in that field had not been turned over to science. It was even possible that he had deciphered the inscription, if inscription it were. But in the meantime Clark intended to open the thing.

Certainly he was going to open it. It was quite characteristic of Martucci that, because of some squeamish eccentricity or other, he had refrained from doing so himself. But had he really thought the new owner would use such illogical restraint? Clark chuckled again.

Still, it was odd that the Italian had never spoken of the casket, especially as he must have decided on its disposal some months before. The date of the codicil showed that. No doubt a little surprize for the "one-time friend"—but odd, just the same, for it was an object over which the failing scientist, with his wide knowledge of antiquities, and Clark with his dilettante love for them, might have had many of the discussions the archeologist had so seemed to enjoy.

And that was a strange wording—"one-time." It almost suggested that Martucci had suspected when he dictated the sentence. But that was impossible. The very assignment of such a rare relic was proof in itself of complete trust and good feeling. After all, the import of the words, intended for reading after the writer's death, was plain enough.

Well, there was no need for further

delay. He had gloated long enough. His black eyes sparkled greedily as he picked up the heavy brass paper-knife from his desk and dug tentatively at the seal. The leaden smear was surprizingly hard; perhaps it was some strange alloy. He pried harder, finally succeeding in inserting the knife-point between the seal and the age-blackened metal of the box itself. The lead refused to bend further; it clung tenaciously to its age-old moorings. At length Clark left it to rummage about the house for tools. He returned with a hammer, and carefully relocked the study's only door before he sat down.

He used the knife as a wedge, and at the first blow the lead peeled neatly away, disclosing a patch of dully shimmering metal beneath. He had not expected to find that the seal covered a key-hole, and nothing of the sort was visible. Evidently the box was far too ancient for that contrivance.

His heart was pounding. He drew an anticipatory breath, and pried the knife-point under the lid. A little leverage and it was done. The cover came up. The casket was empty.

Clark was genuinely surprized. Strange that the box should be so tightly sealed when it held no contents to be guarded. This lacked plausibility.

As he stared in puzzled bewilderment at the burnished inner surface, he became aware of a faint, fetid odor creeping into his nostrils. He sniffed, his nose wrinkling in distaste. Slight though it was, the smell suggested vaguely the charnel emanation from some long-closed tomb.

Then came the cold draft.

Through the close air of the study, which was gradually becoming oppressively hot, it breathed against his face in a single icy gust, laden with a sudden augmentation of the nauseating odor of putrescence. Then it was gone, and the

heated air had closed about him as if nothing had disturbed it.

Clark started up, then sank back in the chair. He frowned, staring hard at door and windows half hidden in the shadowy gloom beyond the circle of lamp-light. He knew them to be locked securely, and an uneasy disquiet stirred in his breast as his probing eyes verified the fact.

His attention was drawn back to the subtle odor of corruption which had gradually grown stronger. It permeated the room now—a dank, mephitic fetor, grotesquely out of place in the quiet study. He rose slowly to his feet, alarm spreading over his features. And as he did so, the icy, noisome chill puffed again upon his face like a breeze from some glacial sepulcher. His head jerked back, and fear dawned in his eyes. Here, in a locked room on the top floor of the old house he had lived in for years, something utterly uncanny, something entirely beyond the realms of sanity, was taking place. Clark started slowly across the study toward the door, then stopped abruptly.

A faint sound had come from the shadow at the far side of the room where the heavy Sarouk rug stopped short a foot from the wall. It was an insidious, barely audible, rustling noise—such a noise as might be made by a great snake writhing along the uncarpeted strip. And it came from *between* him and the door!

CLARK had prided himself, in the past, on his cold-blooded imperturbability; but his breath came quickly now, and the wild, unreasoning fear of a trapped animal flooded his mind. Whatever the nature of the Thing in the room with him—could he doubt its presence?—it was intelligently cutting off his escape. It must be watching his every

movement with malignant, brooding eyes. A shudder of stark horror convulsed him at the realization.

He stood very still in the center of the study, his mind racing in frenzied, terror-driven circles. A sense of the crowding presence of some bestial, primordial depravity, of overwhelming defilement, surged with paralyzing certainty through his brain. Thoughts of escape were crowded out—the imminence of the danger routed reasoning power. And yet, through the waves of terror that beat through his consciousness, he realized that his life—yes, his very soul—was menaced by an unspeakable cosmic malevolence.

With a tremendous effort he checked the rising, smothering hysteria and succeeded in regaining a partial control of his thoughts. His eyes pierced the gloom ahead and about him. Nothing stirred. What hideously ancient entity had been imprisoned in the casket? He could not guess, nor did he wish to know. But Martucci had known—Martucci, the authority on ancient writings; the delver in hidden lore! Martucci had known everything. He had schemed—oh, so cunningly!—for revenge, and this was the result. If the dead could know, how the old man must be gloating to see his crafty trap closing about his victim!

Now Clark felt cold vibrations beating upon him; vibrations of inhuman, impersonal evil. His nerves crawled and shrank as from a loathsome physical contact. He shifted uneasily, and there came the sound of a stealthy, slithering movement toward him across the rug. He backed away, until his shoulders bumped against the wall behind him. Still the soft noises continued, slowly drawing near. They detoured to one side, then to the other; then they were back in front of him, and much closer. His eyes searched

the shadows desperately. Empty, formless, mysterious, they were; but nothing moved that his physical sight could detect. The lurking menace, its presence proclaimed by every taut nerve in his body, was still invisible. If he could trust his eyes, he was alone in the room. But he felt the close proximity of something cold and yet alive; something which was a definite physical presence, manifesting itself to him through pre-human senses, semi-atrophied by eons of disuse. Whatever it was, it was absorbing the suffocating heat of the room, actually lowering the temperature, and at a rapid rate.

Quite suddenly, the utter horror of the impossible, incredible situation broke through the dam of desperate resistance his mind had built up. Something snapped, and he laughed—a high-pitched cachinnation of rising hysteria that echoed wildly from lips drawn back in a grinning frenzy of terror. He cringed, flinging up his arms in an abject surrender to fear. A torrent of gibbering incoherency pushed the terrible laughter from his lips. The dusky room swam about him and he did not know that his knees had buckled and that he had plumped forward on them, his arms rigid before his face to ward off the approaching danger.

Again came the icy breath, rank with primeval filth, terrifying in its nearness. It passed lightly over his face, making him retch with its overpowering fetor. Then he shrieked once in paralyzed despair, as slender, groping tentacles, cold as outer space, caressed his throat and body, their deathly chill striking through his clothing as if he had been naked. A vast, flabby, amorphous coldness enveloped him. Repulsively soft and bulky it was, but as he struggled it gripped him with the resistless strength of chilled steel. He

could feel the regularly spaced vibrations of some utterly alien, incomprehensible life—a life so frightful that he shrieked again and again as its purpose became apparent.

Then the murky room whirled about him—he had been whisked up, was staring with starting eyes at the ceiling, through which little flames were eating, while the fetid horror gradually compressed its icy folds.

He was falling down, down, through endless shafts of icy blackness into a bottomless quagmire of primordial slime. A vast roaring filled his ears. Monstrous fantasies leered through the bursts of flame that punctuated the rushing descent. Then all was silence and blackness and oblivion.

FANNED by the high wind, the flames had gutted the old house when firemen arrived. Little remained to aid the coroner in his investigation. Naturally, he discounted heavily the fantastic testimony of certain early arrivals regarding a high-pitched, agonized whistling sound which they claimed had proceeded from the upper part of the building, and the belching clouds of foul-smelling smoke which had found an exit after the upper floors collapsed and the whistling stopped. Simpkins' admission that he had neglected to close the drafts of the furnace cleared up the cause of the fire; but, privately, the coroner was exceedingly puzzled by certain peculiarities that the post-mortem disclosed in the charred and blackened corpse, identified by a dentist as Wesson Clark's. It was surely a matter of wonder that virtually every bone in this body had been broken, as if in the embrace of some gigantic snake of the constrictor species; and it was an insoluble mystery how the veins and organs had been *drained of every drop of blood!*