

A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL



Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

Volume 25

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Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$3.00 a year in the United States, \$4.00 a year in Canada. English office: Charles Lavell, 13, Serjeants' Inn, Fleet Street, E. C. 4, London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

NOTE—All manuscripts and communications should be addressed to the publishers' Chicago office at 840 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Ill.

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The Secret in the Tomb

By ROBERT BLOCH

*An eldritch tale of stark horror and a terrible rendezvous
in a hidden mausoleum*

THE wind howled strangely over a midnight tomb. The moon hung like a golden bat over ancient graves, glaring through the wan mist with its baleful, nyctalopic eye. Terrors not of the flesh might lurk among cedar-shrouded sepulchers or creep unseen amid shadowed cenotaphs, for this was unhallowed ground. But tombs hold strange secrets, and there are mysteries blacker than the night, and more leprous than the moon.

It was in search of such a secret that I came, alone and unseen, to my ancestral vault at midnight. My people had been sorcerers and wizards in the olden days, so lay apart from the resting-place of other men, here in this moldering mausoleum in a forgotten spot, surrounded only by the graves of those who had been their servants. But not all the servants lay here, for there are those who do not die.

On through the mist I pressed, to where the crumbling sepulcher loomed among the brooding trees. The wind rose to torrential violence as I trod the obscure pathway to the vaulted entrance, extinguishing my lantern with malefic fury. Only the moon remained to light my way in a luminance unholy. And thus I reached the nitrous, fungus-bearded portals of the family vault. Here the moon shone upon a door that was not like other doors—a single massive slab of iron, imbedded in monumental walls of granite. Upon its outer surface was neither handle, lock nor keyhole, but the whole

was covered with carvings portentous of a leering evil—cryptic symbols whose allegorical significance filled my soul with a deeper loathing than mere words can impart. There are things that are not good to look upon, and I did not care to dwell too much in thought on the possible genesis of a mind whose knowledge could create such horrors in concrete form. So in blind and trembling haste I chanted the obscure litany and performed the necessary obeisances demanded in the ritual I had learned, and at their conclusion the cyclopean portal swung open.

Within was darkness, deep, funereal, ancient; yet, somehow, uncannily *alive*. It held a pulsing adumbration, a suggestion of muted, yet purposeful rhythm, and overshadowing all, an air of black, impinging *revelation*. The simultaneous effect upon my consciousness was one of those reactions misnamed intuitions. I sensed that shadows know queer secrets, and there are some skulls that have reason to grin.

Yet I must go on into the tomb of my forebears—tonight the last of all our line would meet the first. For I was the last. Jeremy Strange had been the first—he who fled from the Orient to seek refuge in centuried Eldertown, bringing with him the loot of many tombs and a secret for ever nameless. It was he who had built his sepulcher in the twilight woods where the witch-lights gleam, and here he had interred his own remains,

shunned in death as he had been in life. But buried with him was a secret, and it was this that I had come to seek. Nor was I the first in so seeking, for my father and his father before me, indeed, the eldest of each generation back to the days of Jeremy Strange himself, had likewise sought that which was so maddeningly described in the wizard's diary—the secret of eternal life after death. The musty yellowed tome had been handed down to the elder son of each successive generation, and likewise, so it seemed, the dread atavistic craving for black and accursed knowledge, the thirst for which, coupled with the damnably explicit hints set forth in the warlock's record, had sent every one of my paternal ancestors so bequeathed to a final rendezvous in the night, to seek their heritage within the tomb. What they found, none could say, for none had ever returned.

IT WAS, of course, a family secret. The tomb was never mentioned—it had, indeed, been virtually forgotten with the passage of years that had likewise eradicated many of the old legends and fantastic accusations about the first Strange that had once been common property in the village. The family, too, had been mercifully spared all knowledge of the curse-ridden end to which so many of its men had come. Their secret delvings into black arts; the hidden library of antique lore and demonological formulæ brought by Jeremy from the East; the diary and its secret—all were undreamt of save by the eldest sons. The rest of the line prospered. There had been sea captains, soldiers, merchants, statesmen. Fortunes were won. Many departed from the old mansion on the cape, so that in my father's time he had lived there alone with the servants and myself. My mother died at my birth, and it was a lonely youth

I spent in the great brown house, with a father half-crazed by the tragedy of my mother's end, and shadowed by the monstrous secret of our line. It was he who initiated me into the mysteries and arcanæ to be found amid the shuddery speculations of such blasphemies as the *Necronomicon*, the *Book of Eibon*, the *Cabala of Saboth*, and that pinnacle of literary madness, Ludvig Prinn's *Mysteries of the Worm*. There were grim treatises on anthropomancy, necrology, lycanthropical and vampiristic spells and charms, witchcraft, and long, rambling screeds in Arabic, Sanskrit and prehistoric ideography, on which lay the dust of centuries.

All these he gave me, and more. There were times when he would whisper strange stories about voyages he had taken in his youth—of islands in the sea, and queer survivals spawning dreams beneath arctic ice. And one night he told me of the legend, and the tomb in the forest; and together we turned the worm-ridled pages of the iron-bound diary that was hidden in the panel above the chimney-corner. I was very young, but not too young to know certain things, and as I swore to keep the secret as so many had sworn before me, I had a queer feeling that the time had come for Jeremy to claim his own. For in my father's somber eyes was the same light of dreadful thirst for the unknown, curiosity, and an inward urge that had glowed in the eyes of all the others before him, previous to the time they had announced their intention of "going on a trip" or "joining up" or "attending to a business matter." Most of them had waited till their children were grown, or their wives had passed on; but whenever they had left, and whatever their excuse, they had never returned.

Two days later, my father disappeared,

after leaving word with the servants that he was spending the week in Boston. Before the month was out there was the usual investigation, and the usual failure. A will was discovered among my father's papers, leaving me as sole heir, but the books and the diary were secure in the secret rooms and panels known now to me alone.

Life went on. I did the usual things in the usual way—attended university, traveled, and returned at last to the house on the hill, alone. But with me I carried a mighty determination—I alone could thwart that curse; I alone could grasp the secret that had cost the lives of seven generations—and I alone must do so. The world had nought to offer one who had spent his youth in the study of the mocking truths that lie beyond the outward beauties of a purposeless existence, and I was not afraid. I dismissed the servants, ceased communication with distant relatives and a few close friends, and spent my days in the hidden chambers amid the elder lore, seeking a solution or a spell of such potency as would serve to dispel for ever the mystery of the tomb.

A hundred times I read and reread that hoary script—the diary whose fiend-penned promise had driven men to doom. I searched amid the satanic spells and cabalistic incantations of a thousand forgotten necromancers, delved into pages of impassioned prophecy, burrowed into secret legendary lore whose written thoughts writhed through me like serpents from the pit. It was in vain. All I could learn was the ceremony by which access could be obtained to the tomb in the wood. Three months of study had worn me to a wraith and filled my brain with the diabolic shadows of charnel-spawned knowledge, but that was all. And then, as if in mockery of madness, there had come the call, this very night.

I HAD been seated in the study, pondering upon a maggot-eaten volume of Heiriarchus' *Occultus*, when without warning, I felt a tremendous urge keening through my weary brain. It beckoned and allured with unutterable promise, like the mating-cry of the lamia of old; yet at the same time it held an inexorable power whose potency could not be defied or denied. The inevitable was at hand. I had been summoned to the tomb. I must follow the beguiling voice of inner consciousness that was the invitation and the promise, that sounded my soul like the ultra-rhythmic piping of trans-cosmic music. So I had come, alone and weaponless, to the lonely woods and to that wherein I would meet my destiny.

The moon rose redly over the manor as I left, but I did not look back. I saw its reflection in the waters of the brook that crept between the trees, and in its light the water was as blood. Then the fog rose silently from the swamp, and a yellow ghost-light rode the sky, beckoning me on from behind the black and bloated trees whose branches, swept by a dismal wind, pointed silently toward the distant tomb. Roots and creepers impeded my feet, vines and brambles restrained my body, but in my ears thundered a chorus of urgency that can not be described and which could not be delayed, by nature or by man.

Now, as I hesitated upon the door-step, a million idiot voices gibbered an invitation to enter that mortal mind could not withstand. Through my brain resounded the horror of my heritage—the insatiable craving to know the forbidden, to mingle and become one with it. A pæan of hell-born music crescendoed in my ears, and earth was blotted out in a mad urge that engulfed all being.

I paused no longer upon the threshold. I went in, in where the smell of death

filled the darkness that was like the sun over Yuggoth. The door closed, and then came—what? I do not know—I only realized that suddenly I could see and feel and hear, despite darkness, and dankness, and silence.

I was in the tomb. Its monumental walls and lofty ceiling were black and bare, lichenized by the passage of centuries. In the center of the mausoleum stood a single slab of black marble. Upon it rested a gilded coffin, set with strange symbols, and covered by the dust of ages. I knew instinctively what it must contain, and the knowledge did not serve to put me at my ease. I glanced at the floor, then wished I hadn't. Upon the debris-strewn base beneath the slab lay a ghastly, disarticulated group of mortuary remains—half-fleshed cadavers and desiccated skeletons. When I thought of my father and the others, I was possessed of a sickening dismay. They too had sought, and they had failed. And now I had come, alone, to find that which had brought them to an end unholy and unknown. The secret! The secret in the tomb!

Mad eagerness filled my soul. I too would know—I must! As in a dream I swayed to the gilded coffin. A moment I tottered above it; then, with a strength born of delirium, I tore away the paneling and lifted the gilded lid, and then I knew it was no dream, for dreams can not approach the ultimate horror that was the creature lying within the coffin—that creature with eyes like a midnight demon's, and a face of loathsome delirium that was like the death-mask of a devil. It was smiling, too, as it lay there, and my soul shrieked in the tortured realization that it was *alive!* Then I knew it all; the secret and the penalty paid by those who sought it, and I was ready for death, but horrors had not ceased, for

even as I gazed it spoke, in a voice like the hissing of a black slug.

And there within the nighted gloom it whispered the secret, staring at me with ageless, deathless eyes, so that I should not go mad before I heard the whole of it. All was revealed—the secret crypts of blackest nightmare where the tomb-spawn dwell, and of a price whereby a man may become one with ghouls, living after death as a devourer in darkness. Such a thing had it become, and from this shunned, accursed tomb had sent the call to the descending generations, that when they came, there might be a ghastly feast whereby it might continue a dread, eternal life. I (it breathed) would be the next to die, and in my heart I knew that it was so.

I could not avert my eyes from its accursed gaze, nor free my soul from its hypnotic bondage. The thing on the bier cackled with unholy laughter. My blood froze, for I saw two long, lean arms, like the rotted limbs of a corpse, steal slowly toward my fear-constricted throat. The monster sat up, and even in the clutches of my horror, I realized that there was a dim and awful resemblance between the creature in the coffin and a certain ancient portrait back in the Hall. But this was a transfigured reality—Jeremy the man become Jeremy the ghoul; and I knew that it would do no good to resist. Two claws, cold as flames of icy hell, fastened around my throat, two eyes bored like maggots through my frenzied being, a laughter born of madness alone cachinnated in my ears like the thunder of doom. The bony fingers tore at my eyes and nostrils, held me helpless while yellow fangs champed nearer and nearer to my throat. The world spun, wrapped in a mist of fiery death.

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The Secret in the Tomb

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Suddenly the spell broke. I wrenched my eyes away from that slavering, evil face, and instantly, like a cataclysmic flash of light, came realization. This creature's power was purely mental—by that alone were my ill-fated kinsmen drawn here, and by that alone were they overcome, but once one were free from the strength of the monster's awful eyes—good God! Was I going to be the victim of a crumbled mummy?

My right arm swung up, striking the horror between the eyes. There was a sickening crunch; then dead flesh yielded before my hand as I seized the now faceless lich in my arms and cast it into fragments upon the bone-covered floor. Streaming with perspiration and mummbling in hysteria and terrible revulsion, I saw the moldy fragments move even in a second death—a severed hand crawled across the flagging, upon musty, shredded fingers; a leg began to roll with the animation of grotesque, unholy life. With a shriek, I cast a lighted match upon that loathsome corpse, and I was still shrieking as I clawed open the portals and rushed out of the tomb and into the world of sanity, leaving behind me a smoldering fire from whose charred heart a terrible voice still faintly moaned its tortured requiem to that which had once been Jeremy Strange.

The tomb is razed now, and with it the forest graves and all the hidden chambers and manuscripts that serve as a reminder of ghoul-ridden memories that can never be forgot. For earth hides a madness and dreams a hideous reality, and monstrous things abide in the shadows of death, lurking and waiting to seize the souls of those who meddle with forbidden things.