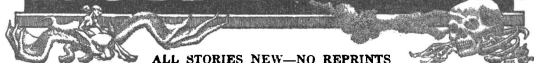


Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS

SEPTEMBER, 1942

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W. McILWRAITH, Editor.

HENRY AVELINE PERKINS, Associate Editor.

We traversed many vaults in which mouldy bones and verdigris-eaten sarcophagi were piled about the walls . . .”



Who Are the Living?

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH

Behind his words hovered a legion of dark images. And the stoop of his shoulders seemed to bear a burden of centuries through which no man could conceivably have lived!

I FIND it peculiarly difficult to express the exact nature of the sentiment which Tomeron had always evoked in me. However, I am sure that the feeling never partook, at any time, of what is ordinarily known as friendship. It was a compound of unusual esthetic and intellectual elements, and was somehow

closely allied in my thoughts with the same fascination that has drawn me ever since childhood toward all things that are remote in space and time, or which have about them the irresolvable twilight of antiquity. Somehow, Tomeron seemed never to belong to the present; but one could readily have imagined him as living in some bygone age. About him, there was nothing whatever of the lineaments of our own period; and he even went so far as to affect in his costume an approximation to the garments worn several centuries ago. His complexion was extremely pale and cadaverous, and he stooped heavily from poring over ancient tomes and no less ancient maps. He moved always with the slow, meditative pace of one who dwells among far-off memories and reveries; and he spoke often of people and events and ideas that have long since been forgotten. For the most part, he was apparently unheeding of present things, and I felt that for him the huge city of Ptolemides, in which we both dwelt, with all its manifold clamor and tumult, was little more than a labyrinth of painted vapors. There was a like vagueness in the attitude of others toward Tomeron; and though he had always been accepted without question as a representative of the noble and otherwise extinct family from whom he claimed descent, nothing appeared to be known about his actual birth and antecedents. With two servants who were both deaf-mutes, who were very old and who likewise wore the raiment of a former age, he lived in the semi-ruinous mansion of his ancestors, where, it was said, none of the family had dwelt for many generations. There he pursued the occult and recondite studies that were so congenial to his mind; and there, at certain intervals, I was wont to visit him.

I cannot recall the precise date and circumstances of the beginning of my acquaintance with Tomeron. Though I come

of a hardy line that is noted for the sanity of its constitution, my faculties have been woefully shaken by the horror of the happening with which that acquaintance ended. / My memory is not what it was, and there are certain lacunae for which my readers must contrive to forgive me. The only wonder is, that my powers of recollection have survived at all, beneath the hideous burden they have had to bear; for, in a more than metaphoric sense, I have been as one condemned to carry with him, at all times and in all places, the loathsome incubi of things long dead and corrupt.

I can readily recall, however, the studies to which Tomeron had devoted himself, the lost demonian volumes from Hyperborea and Mu and Atlantis with which his library shelves were heaped to the ceiling, and the queer charts, not of any land that lies above the surface of the earth, on which he pored by perpetual candle-light. I shall not speak of these studies, for they would seem too fantastic and too macabre for credibility; and that which I have to relate is incredible enough in itself. I shall speak, however, of certain strange ideas with which Tomeron was much preoccupied, and concerning which he so often discoursed to me in that deep, guttural and monotonous voice of his, that had the reverberation of unsounded caverns in its tones and cadences. He maintained that life and death were not the fixed conditions that people commonly believed them to be; that the two realms were often intermingled in ways not readily discerned, and had penumbral border-lands; that the dead were not always the dead, nor the living the living, as such terms are habitually understood. But the manner in which he spoke of these ideas was extremely vague and general; and I could never induce him to specify his meaning or to proffer some concrete illustration that would render it more intelligible to a mentality such as mine, that was unused to dealing in the

cobwebs of abstraction. Behind his words, there hovered, or seemed to hover, a legion of dark, amorphous images that I could never formulate or depict to myself in any way, until the final denouement of our descent into the catacombs of Ptolemides.

I HAVE already said that my feeling for Tomeron was never anything that could be classified as friendship. But even from the first, I was well aware that Tomeron had a curious fondness for me—a fondness whose nature I could not comprehend, and with which I could hardly even sympathize. Though he fascinated me at all times, there were occasions when my interest was not unalloyed with an actual sense of repulsion. At whiles, his pallor was *too* cadaverous, too suggestive of fungi that have grown in the dark, or of leprous bones by moonlight; and the stoop of his shoulders conveyed to my brain the idea that they bore a burden of centuries through which no man could conceivably have lived. He aroused always a certain awe in me; and the awe was sometimes mingled with an indeterminate fear.

I do not remember how long our acquaintance had continued; but I do remember that he spoke with increasing frequency, toward the end, of those bizarre ideas at which I have hinted. Always I felt that he was troubled about something, for he often looked at me with a mournful gleam in his hollow eyes; and sometimes he would speak, with peculiar stress, of the great regard that he had for me. And one night he said:

"Theolus, the time is coming when you must know the truth—must know me as I am, and not as I have been permitted to seem. There is a term to all things, and all things are obedient to inexorable laws. I would that it were otherwise, but neither I nor any man, among the living or among

the dead, can lengthen at will the term of any state or condition of being, or alter the laws that decree such conditions."

Perhaps it was well that I did not understand him, and that I was unable to attach much importance to his words or to the singular intentness of his bearing as he uttered them. For a few more days, I was spared the knowledge which I now carry. Then, one evening, Tomeron spoke thus:

"I am now compelled to ask an odd favor of you, which I hope you will grant me, in consideration of our long friendship. The favor is, that you accompany me this very night to those vaults of my family which lie in the catacombs of Ptolemides."

Though much surprised by the request, and not altogether pleased, I was nevertheless unable to deny him. I could not imagine the purpose of such a visit as the one proposed; but, as was my wont, I forbore to interrogate Tomeron, and merely told him that I would accompany him to the vaults if such were his desire.

"I thank you, Theolus, for this proof of friendship," he replied earnestly. "Believe me, I am loath to ask it; but there has been a certain deception, an odd misunderstanding which cannot go on any longer. Tonight, you will learn the truth."

Carrying torches, we left the mansion of Tomeron and sought the ancient catacombs of Ptolemides, which lie beyond the walls and have long been disused, for there is now a fine necropolis in the very heart of the city. The moon had gone down beyond the desert that encroaches toward the catacombs; and we were forced to light our torches long before we came to the subterranean adits; for the rays of Mars and Jupiter in a sodden and funereal sky were not enough to illumine the perilous path we followed among mounds and fallen obelisks and broken graves. At length we discovered the dark and weed-choked en-

trance of the charnels; and here Tomeron led the way with a swiftness and surety of footing that bespoke long familiarity with the place.

Entering, we found ourselves in a crumbling passage where the bones of dilapidated skeletons were scattered amid the rubble that had fallen from the sides and roof.

A choking stench of stagnant air and age-old corruption made me pause for an instant; but Tomeron scarcely appeared to perceive it, for he strode onward, lifting his torch and beckoning me to follow. We traversed many vaults in which mouldy bones and verdigris-eaten sarcophagi were piled about the walls or strewn where desecrating thieves had left them in bygone years. The air was increasingly dank, chill and miasmal; and mephitic shadows crouched or swayed before our torches in every niche and corner. Also, as we went onward, the walls became more ruinous and the bones we saw on every hand were greener with the mould of time.

At length we rounded a sudden angle of the low cavern we were following. Here we came to vaults that evidently belonged to some noble family, for they were quite spacious and there was but one sarcophagus in each vault.

"My ancestors and my family lie here," announced Tomeron.

We reached the cavern's end and were confronted by a blank wall. At one side, was the final vault, in which an empty sarcophagus stood open. The sarcophagus was wrought of the finest bronze and was richly carven.

Tomeron paused before the vault and turned to me. By the flickering, uncertain light I thought that I saw a look of strange and unaccountable distress on his features.

"I must beg you to withdraw for a mo-

ment," he said, in a low and sorrowful voice. "Afterwards, you can return."

SURPRISED and puzzled, I obeyed his request and went slowly back along the passage for some distance. Then I returned to the place where I had left him. My surprise was heightened when I found that he had extinguished his torch and had dropped it on the threshold of the final vault. And Tomeron himself was not visible anywhere.

Entering the vault, since there was seemingly no other place where he could have hidden himself, I looked about for him, but the room was empty. At least, I thought it empty till I looked again at the richly carven sarcophagus and saw that it was now tenanted, for a cadaver lay within, shrouded in a winding-sheet of a sort that has not been used for centuries in Ptolemides.

I drew near to the sarcophagus, and peering into the face of the cadaver, I saw that it bore a fearful and strange resemblance to the face of Tomeron, though it was bloated and puffed with the adipocere of death and was purple with the shadows of decay. And looking again, I saw that it was indeed Tomeron.

I would have screamed aloud with horror that came upon me; but my lips were benumbed and frozen, and I could only whisper Tomeron's name. But as I whispered it, the lips of the cadaver seemed to part, and the tip of its tongue protruded between them. And I thought that the tip trembled, as if Tomeron were about to speak and answer me. But gazing more closely, I saw that the trembling was merely the movement of worms as they twisted up and down and to and fro and sought to crowd each other from Tomeron's tongue.
