

The MUMMY

What weird science lay in the mummy case of Ret-Seh? What uncanny power created this lovely, terrifying vision?





The Mummy of Ret Seh

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CHAPTER I - The Cat

THE mummy case was the finest thing of its sort that Hargraves ever had seen; a magnificent thing marvelous with paint and gold. It was a slender elaborate affair showing the figure of a woman, a woman who must have been a ravishing beauty in life if the carved and painted face was even a passable likeness of the original whose body was—supposedly—within the case.

Moreover, it was a strikingly lifelike face; a face of perfect oval, with a delicate cleft chin, with beautifully rounded cheeks, with broad low forehead crowned with masses of black hair, with a thin straight nose that would have been imperious had it not been for the uptilted tip; with arching brows over lustrous eyes that seemed—even in painted form—to gaze up at Hargraves with a questing, ardent expression; and with carmine lips parted in an alluring, most provocative smile.

"Actually looks as if she wanted to be kissed," mused Hargraves as he stood off and admired the carved and painted figure. "Must have been a pretty thing if she looked like that. Regular heart-breaker, back in days of the Pharaohs, I expect. And what a figure! Might represent Pharaoh's daughter at the time she found little Moses."

The effigy left little to the imagination, for it was scantily clad, its coverings consisting mainly of jewelry and other ornaments. But Hargraves, although fully appreciative of the loveliness of the form with its tapering limbs, narrow waist, rounded breasts and beautiful face, regarded it quite impersonally. To him it was merely a mummy-case, an exceptionally fine specimen, perhaps unique, for he could not recall ever having seen a case on the cover of which the occupant was depicted as practically nude. He was more than delighted at his new acquisition, and the more so because it had come so unexpectedly.

He had long wanted a mummy for his collection. Not an ordinary mummy such as are obtainable by scores, but a really fine mummy that never had been unwrapped, a mummy of some personage of eminence—perhaps a royal mummy—intact in its case.

At a storage auction he had purchased a box said to contain Oriental goods and curios, and upon opening it he had been amazed and delighted at finding that the "Oriental goods and curios" consisted of just such a mummy-case as he had longed to add to his private museum. Best of all, the case apparently had never been opened and still contained a mummy in its original wrappings.

Whose mummy, he wondered, was within it? Of course it would be that of a woman. But who was she? Was she the daughter of a Pharaoh? Was she of the nobility? Was she a priestess or a vestal virgin of some cult or temple? Was she the favorite wife of some long dead king, a royal concubine or merely some common courtesan?

It was fascinating to speculate on her identity, and Hargraves looked forward with keen anticipation to removing the wrappings from the deceased lady's body.

Dusting off the case he started to open it when he remembered that he had a dinner engagement with the Claytons. He had less than an hour in which to dress and rush off. He would have to leave the mummy case until another time. But he was consumed with curiosity to know beyond doubt if the case contained the mummy intact. He worked rapidly, almost feverishly, and at last the lid was loose.

Filled with suppressed excitement he gently raised the cover. Disturbed by the suction and the inrush of air, a little smokelike cloud of dust issued from the case, and Hargraves was aware of a most peculiar odor. It was not the musty smell of dessicated flesh and textiles, not the bituminous or spicy scent of frankincense or myrrh which might have been expected. Instead, it was pungently sweet, rather cloying, a sensuous perfume that reminded him of the odor of some exotic flowers.

But he scarcely noticed it at the time, as he peered into the case. Yes, the mummy was there. Wrapped in cloths that scarcely were stained, that were almost as white as on the day when they had been wound about the body, was a shapeless form—no doubt the mummy of the woman whose beauty was perpetuated upon the lid of the case.

Lowering the cover, Hargraves glanced at his watch and dashed off.

OF course, he had to tell the Claytons about the new acquisition to his collection.

Mrs. Clayton shuddered. "Really, I think it quite terrible—having such a gruesome object in one's home," she declared. "And positively indecent."

Her husband chuckled. "Because it's a young lady, my dear?" he inquired.

"No, because it is a dead body, even if mummified," she told him. "Would you care to have the body of your daughter treated as a curiosity and placed on exhibition?"

Clayton winked at Hargraves. "I haven't a daughter, you know," he reminded his wife, "and not being a Pharaoh I can't say how I should feel in regard to the matter."

But as Clayton was not interested in mummies, he turned the conversation into other channels.

As his hosts did not keep late hours, and as he had an accumulated mass of correspondence to attend to, Hargraves left early, and he heard a clock strike eleven as he drove homeward.

As he stood before his door, fumbling for his key, a low "meow" caused him to turn. Seated upon the doorsteps, her tawny eyes fixed upon him, was a large tortoise shell cat.

"Well, puss, what do you want?" he asked good naturedly.

For answer the cat rose, arched her back and rubbed herself, purring, against his legs. She was an exceptionally fine and handsome specimen and Hargraves, who was fond of animals, stooped and stroked her head as he turned the key in the lock.

"Now run along home," he admonished her. But instead of obeying, the cat slipped through the door and vanished in the dark hallway.

"Here, kitty, kitty!" he called. "Come along. Out you go, tabby. This isn't your home."

But there was no response and he snapped on the lights. The cat, however, was nowhere to be seen. "Hmm," he thought as he removed hat and coat, "I'll have to hunt her up and put her out. Must belong to some neighbor, she's no common alley cat." Still, he reflected, there wasn't any hurry. He'd let her remain until he was ready for bed. She was an efficient looking beast and he had noticed signs of mice in the house. Make her pay for admittance, as one might say.

He stepped into his study and switched on the light. "Well, well!" You certainly have made yourself at home," he exclaimed, as he saw the cat curled upon the lounge by the open fire, her tawny eyes half-closed and watching him speculatively.

"All right, old girl," he said, as he seated himself at his table, "stay there if you're comfortable. And—" he added as he glanced at her—"you are rather decorative, you know."

Busy with papers and letters, Hargraves forgot the cat completely. Presently, however, he was aware of a peculiar odor obtruding itself upon his senses. It was most unusual and yet somehow familiar—a pungently sweet smell—and he sniffed suspiciously at a square, lavender-colored envelope he had not yet opened. Then, suddenly, he remembered. Of course! It was the same odor he had noticed when he had opened the mummy case. He must have left the door to his museum room ajar. A slight sound, suspiciously like a yawn, caused him to turn, sharply.

Dumbfounded, speechless, he stared incredulously, unable to believe the evidence of his senses.

Reclining upon the lounge, regarding him with half-closed languorous eyes, was a woman! In exactly the same pose, the same spot, as lay the cat just a few minutes earlier!

DESPITE his amazement and his chaotic state of mind at finding a strange female in his study, Hargraves was aware of the fact that she was very lovely. And, mingled with his astonishment and his wonder as to who she was and how she had entered the room, was a distinct sense of embarrassment for the young lady was most scantily clad.

All these varied sensations, thought and reactions were instantaneous. And in the fraction of a second while they were flashing through his mind, he also sensed something familiar about the appearance of his alluring but uninvited and mysterious guest. Then, as once more that peculiar, exotic perfume filled his nostrils, a chill ran along his spine, his scalp tingled. The woman on the lounge was the living counterpart of the figure on the mummy-case!

For the briefest of moments, Hargraves was terrified. But the next second common senses drove fear from his brain. Of course it was only some optical or mental illusion. He hadn't been drinking, so it wasn't the result of alcohol. No, it was just his mental state—subconscious thoughts of the mummy plus a tired brain, coupled with that odor from the museum room. Of course there was no woman there. There simply couldn't be. Just imagination.

With no little effort of will power he closed his eyes. He held them closed one second, two seconds, five seconds. Then he raised his lids slowly, looking straight toward the lounge.

The woman was gone, completely disappeared. In her place lay the cat, with tawny eyes sleepily half-closed.

It was just as he had expected—purely a hallucination, a psychological matter. Still he didn't relish the idea of seeing visions. He never had been subject to nerves, optical illusions nor even dreams. He decided he had better see his physician. He must have been overdoing—needed a change of scene perhaps.

He yawned, stretched himself and turned to pick up the cat and put her out. But the creature had vanished.

He peered sleepily about the room, calling "Kitty, kitty," but there was no answering "meow."

"Bother the beast!" he muttered. "I'll put her out in the morning."

He turned to leave the room, cast a final glance at the lounge and started. Something that sparkled was resting among the cushions. He stepped forward and picked it up. Once again he felt that tingling at the back of his neck. The object was a little golden ornament—a pendant in the form of a cat's head!

For a moment Hargrave's head reeled. The thing was—"Rot!" he ejaculated. "I'm getting nerves. The thing must have dropped from the cat's collar."

Tossing the bauble onto his table, he switched off the lights, strode from the study and mounted the stairs to his bedroom. He was sleepier than he had realized. Undressing in a jiffy, Hargrave opened his window wide, switched off the bedroom light, and jumped into bed.

The next instant, with a choking, gurgling cry, he leaped to the floor. There, lying in the bed, reclining comfortably under the covers, was a woman!

One arm was extended above her head, masses of dark hair covered the pillow, and to Hargrave's shattered senses her eyes appeared to shine with a tawny luminous light. He felt icy cold. He feared he had gone raving mad. And in his nostrils was that cloying perfume, almost overpowering in its intensity.

For fully ten seconds he stood there, flattened against the wall, gasping, on the verge of collapse. Then, summoning all his will power, and compelling his benumbed muscles to obey, he edged slowly towards the light switch, though keeping his eyes fixed upon that motionless form upon the bed. He was almost at the switch, his outstretched fingers were groping for it, when he stubbed his toe against a chair. Involuntarily, with a sharp cry of pain, he glanced down. At the same instant his fingers touched the switch and the room was flooded with light.

The bed was empty.

For a moment Hargraves stared. He could not believe it possible. The vision—for of course it had been a vision—had been so lifelike, so damnably real. And that odor! Was it possible, he wondered, for a person to have optical and nasal illusions coincidentally?

Trembling, shaken, nervous and overwrought, he moved toward the bed. It was empty, there wasn't the least doubt about that. It had been only— He leaped back as if struck. Upon the pillow was a hollow, an indentation such as a human head would have made.

With hands that shook so he scarcely could hold the glass, he poured himself a stiff drink of whiskey and gulped it down raw. Then, with set jaws, with grim determination, he secured his revolver, saw to it that it was fully loaded, and with electric torch in one hand and cocked pistol in the other, he started on a hunt for the cat.

He was convinced that the cat had been the direct cause of his hallucinations, for he mentally had convinced himself that they were hallucinations. There had been no woman on the lounge, no woman on the bed. The idea was utterly preposterous. A flesh and blood woman simply couldn't have been there, and he didn't believe in spirits or ghosts. As for those indentations on the pillow—they, of course, had been made by the cat.

Neither had he any intention of shooting at the visionary woman if she should again appear. If—he argued to himself as he switched on lights and searched through the rooms for the cat—if she were a vision, it would be ridiculous to shoot at it. And if not—but of course that was an utter impossibility—then he certainly was not going to murder some bold hussy who had intruded her unwelcome presence upon him.

In fact his mental state was decidedly chaotic. Although common sense told him that the whole affair had been a figment of his mind, the result of nerves and thoughts of the mummy, yet another lobe of his brain was arguing that it had been no figment of imagination; but that a woman actually had been in his study and in his bed. Still another brain cell, which

he could not stifle, was suggesting something occult and supernatural, and was connecting the visions with the mummy in a most unpleasant manner.

And despite his mental arguments and his utter disbelief in anything either inexplicable or supernatural, nothing on earth would have induced Hargraves to have entered the museum room.

But search as he might elsewhere, he could find no trace of the cat, and at last, cursing himself for a fool, and deciding he must consult Doctor Gale in the morning, he returned to his room, gulped down another double Scotch and, locking his door, went to bed.

CHAPTER II - The Lost Mummy

IT was very late when Hargraves awoke. The events of the night seemed like a dream; but the glass with the dregs of whiskey, the loaded revolver and the electric torch by his bedside assured him that they had actually taken place. And although he felt perfectly normal he did not alter his decision to see his physician.

Hargraves lived alone. He took all his meals out, and as he detested having servants about the place he had arranged for an eminently respectable middle-aged widow to come each morning to attend to the necessary housework. But the widow Stebbins had been given strict orders never to enter the museum room, for Hargraves would trust no one to dust and sweep about his cherished specimens.

"Did you see anything of a cat?" he asked Mrs. Stebbins, as he entered the study where she was busily dusting.

"A cat!" she exclaimed, looking at him in surprise. "Indeed, sir, I did not! And what might a cat be doing in your house, sir?"

"She was outside—on the doorstep—when I came in last night," he explained. "She slipped in when I opened the door. Couldn't find her when I went to put her out."

"Well, sir, she's not here now," the widow assured him. "And—" she added—"if she be, out she'll go the moment I put my eyes onto her. A cat indeed—" she muttered. "A tabby-cat in a bachelor's house. Now if 'twas a fine dog—" Her voice trailed off as Hargraves left the room.

Somewhat hesitatingly he opened the door to the room that housed his collections, and glanced within. Queer, he thought, how those ridiculous hallucinations of the night still affected him. He actually felt a trifle—well, not precisely afraid, but rather suspicious of the mummy case. Rot of course, but still— He stood staring, gaping.

The mummy case stood just where he had left it but—open! The lid was pushed far to one side, yet he could have sworn that he had closed it on the preceding afternoon. But—he decided as he got his nerves under control—it must have been that in his hurry and excitement he had failed to replace the lid. This mental argument was not, however, as convincing as he would have liked. He remembered distinctly having lifted the lid but slightly—just enough to enable him to glance within the case in order to see if it contained the—

Resolutely he marched forward, and actually felt vastly relieved when he found the contents of the case intact. Laughing at his vague, almost superstitious uneasiness of a moment before, he replaced the lid, left the room and started for Doctor Gale's office.

HE wondered just how he could broach the subject to the physician. He hated to tell him what he had seen—or rather imagined. Yet he couldn't see a way out of it. Perhaps he could evade it by merely stating he had seen "things," without explaining just what. Or he might say he had seen a cat where it didn't exist. But no, that wasn't the same thing at all, for the cat did exist. Besides, he was convinced that the illusions were the result of his subconscious thoughts of the mummy. If the doctor was to be of any help he would have to know all the details.

Doctor Gale listened attentively as Hargraves, flushing a bit, gave his account of the events of the night. Then the physician burst into a roar of laughter and slapped his caller on the back.

"Gad!" he cried, "you are a lucky dog. Why, damme, I'd be pleased as Punch to have that sort of visions. And you wish to be rid of them—you beggar! Tut, tut, Hargraves!"

Hargraves flushed angrily. "I tell you there wasn't any girl," he insisted. "I just thought—"

"That you touched her, eh?" the other interrupted. "Why didn't you prove her unreality by going a bit further? Why didn't you try to kiss her? I should have done so."

Hargraves rose. "I came to consult you as my physician," he said in frigid tones. "I consider your levity and your remarks very unseemly. I shall—"

"No, you won't!" declared the doctor, pushing the other back into his chair. "Either you're a damn fool or else your nerves are in rotten shape, and I intend to learn which it is. Now, let me see. You purchase a mummy-case which presumably contains the mummy of an Egyptian beauty whose likeness is depicted upon the lid. Upon opening the case you notice a distinctive odor. My dear sir, all joking aside, the rest follows as a natural sequence.

"The cat—the symbol of femininity—merely served as the impetus to set in motion your psychological impressions. In other words your—well, I should deem them pleasurable—visions, were nothing more than waking dreams. Just as a slight noise acting upon a sleeping mind may cause vivid dreams of explosions, so the presence of a lithe and handsome cat, acting on your subconscious mind, created the vision of a woman in your mind.

"It's very simple, very simple indeed, and nothing to worry about. Still it may occur again and again unless you have a care. I'll give you a nerve tonic, but I advise you to take a trip—to Bermuda, Madeira—anywhere so you'll have plenty of out of door exercise and fresh

air and change of scene. And don't fool about with mummies or other junk, or play with stray cats."

Hargraves felt vastly relieved. The doctor's diagnosis had fully confirmed his own conclusions.

"I believe I will run off for a while," he said as he prepared to leave. "I had planned to unwrap the mummy; but perhaps I'd better wait until I return."

"By all means," the other told him.

Although Hargraves had every intention of obeying his physician's orders to the letter, yet as he left the doctor's office, his mind was more on mummies than on travels, and almost unconsciously he found himself parking his car before the archaeological museum.

PROFESSOR BLACKETT, who was busy poring over some Assyrian tablets, greeted Hargraves cordially, and he smiled indulgently as his visitor began to tell him about the latest addition to his collection. He knew these amateurs and how enthusiastic they became over trifles. But when the other described the mummy case, the scientist straightened up, instantly all attention.

"Let me have that again," he said when Hargraves had told about the figure on the lid. "You say the woman is scantily clad. What are the predominating colors, or didn't you notice? Are there any symbols—hieroglyphs?"

"Aside from the coloring of the skin, I should say there is little but red and green with a good deal of gold," Hargraves told him. "Yet, now I recall it, there is some black. Yes, there are characters, but of course they meant nothing to me."

Professor Blackett rose. "Would you recognize them if you saw them?" he asked as he searched among a stack of pamphlets.

"I'm positive I would—that is, some of them," the other declared.

The archaeologist selected a paper-covered volume, and opening it ran quickly through the pages until he came to a plate covered with engravings of Egyptian symbols. "See any of them there?" he asked.

Hargraves studied the figures intently. "Yes, there's one!" he exclaimed. "Here's another, and there are three more. I—"

"How about this?" the Egyptologist asked, turning to the frontispiece of the volume.

Hargraves almost jumped from his chair. "But—but—Good Lord! Why that's a picture of my mummy case!" he cried.

Professor Blackett smiled as he closed the book. "My dear sir let me be the first to congratulate you," he exclaimed. "Unless I am greatly in error, or unless your mummy case is a rank imitation, you are the possessor of the lost mummy of Ret-Seh."

"What!" gasped the other. "You mean you know who—what— What the deuce do you mean by a 'lost' mummy?"

The professor leaned back in his chair and placed the tips of his fingers together. "All Egyptologists know of the mummy of Ret-Seh," he replied. "It is one of the famous mummies of the archaeological world. It vanished most mysteriously from the collection of Professor Buenaventura of Milan. Stolen, undoubtedly, for the owner was found murdered—strangled—in his museum."

"Why on earth should anyone wish to steal a mummy and commit murder to do so?" Hargraves wanted to know.

"Collectors have been known to commit murder—or cause murder to be done—for much less than the mummy of Ret-Seh—for such trifles as books or pictures," the professor reminded him. "And this mummy was—or rather is—unique. As far as known it is the only mummy of a Pharaoh's favorite concubine whose identity positively has been established, and who is portrayed in the seductive attire in which she was wont to appear before her royal lover."

Moreover, strange as it may seem, the body never had been unwrapped. Remarkable that! Buenaventura—who was the author of the monograph I showed you—had invited a number of Egyptologists to be present at the unwrapping of the mummy. But he was killed and the mummy case with its contents was stolen on the night preceding the appointed date.

"From that day to this, no one ever has seen or heard of the specimen. And as you state that the contents appear intact, it is obvious that no one ever has unwrapped the mummy. So you see, my dear sir, that you not only possess a very rare and famous mummy, but also one of which little—I might say almost nothing—is known. Unwrapping your mummy may reveal most unexpected results. Of course you will unwrap it? And if you will permit me to be present, to assist you, I shall be most deeply grateful."

Hargraves was deeply impressed by the other's words, and while Professor Blackett had been speaking he had been tempted to relate the story of the strange hallucinations of the preceding night. But Blackett was a hard-headed, practical, matter-of-fact scientist; and somehow Hargraves didn't relish the idea of broadcasting the fact that he was "seeing things." So he said nothing.

But the idea of unwrapping the mummy of the royal concubine was, somehow, rather repellent.

"Really, I hadn't thought much about that," he said, referring to the other's query. "But if you wish to do it—I presume it is important from a scientific standpoint—why, you're welcome to the job. It doesn't appeal to me. And if you do unwrap it, you'll do so here in the museum, if you don't mind. You see—Well, to tell the truth, a dead body is a dead body, after all. And, er, really, the case is all that interests me. You're welcome to the contents—gift to the museum, you know. But—" as a new idea occurred to him—"if the thing was stolen I have no right to it. Shouldn't it be returned to its rightful owners?"

The scientist smiled. "Who are the owners?" he asked. "Regardless of how Buenaventura obtained it, it was unquestionably stolen—rifled—from its tomb. As far as I am aware he had no heirs. No, I don't think the ethics of ownership need trouble you. And I shall be all impatience to remove the wrappings. I'd go with you now and get the specimen were it not that I have an appointment to meet Doctor Rumford who wishes my opinion on some truly wonderful jades he secured from a Persian tomb. But I'll be over to your place in the morning. And accept my heartiest thanks—on behalf of the museum—for the gift."

Hargraves felt rather relieved at thought of being rid of the mummy. Funny, he'd been so keen on having a mummy, and now he had one—and a most valuable one at that—he didn't want it and was more than willing to give it away. In fact he was tempted to increase his donation to the museum by including the case together with its contents. After all, he mused, it was the case and not the mummy that had caused his hallucinations. And if the case remained in his home weren't such illusions liable to recur? Of course he would rid himself of that confounded cat—provided Mrs. Stebbins hadn't found her and put her out. But even so—Well, perhaps he'd better let the matter rest as it was until he returned from his trip.

REMEMBERING Doctor Gale's admonition to forget mummies and cats, Hargraves resolutely put aside thoughts of all such matters and spent the day playing golf. Then he dined at his club, passed the evening at a revue and drove home tired, sleepy and with all thoughts of the mummy completely driven from his mind. He had intended to go directly to bed. But there were some documents which his lawyers required, and fearing he might forget them if he waited until the next day, he decided to sign them and have them ready to post in the morning.

With this matter in mind he entered his study, and halted in his tracks, staring into the darkness. Glowing like living coals in the blackness were two points of yellow fire. Two gleaming luminous eyes!

For an instant a strange indefinable dread held him in its grip. Then he laughed. "That damned cat again!" he exclaimed as he snapped on the switch.

As sudden light flooded the room, the cat leaped from the lounge, and with a startled "meow," dashed across the floor through the heavy curtain that covered the door leading to the museum room.

"No, you don't!" cried Hargraves, springing after the creature. "This time you go out and stay out. I've—"

The words froze on his lips. He staggered back, gasping, stunned, cold with terror. For, beside the now open mummy case stood the erect form of a woman, one bare arm resting on its edge!

TO Hargraves' fear-stricken eyes she seemed the figure on the mummy case come to life. There was no mistaking her. The face, with those seductive tawny eyes were the same. The perfect, alluring form, revealed in all its lithe symmetry and beauty by the transparent garments, even the semi-barbaric jewelry, were identical. She was the same mysterious, uncanny, ghostly being whom he had seen upon the lounge, whom he had seen and touched—a shudder went over him at the memory—upon his bed. And—so inexplicable are the workings of the human brain—even in his stark, brain-paralyzing terror, he noticed that among the pendants attached to her golden collar—pendants in the form of cats' heads—there was one missing!

Also, he was aware of that same overpowering, sweetish, pungent perfume, which, each time, had accompanied the apparition.

But now he knew she was not an apparition, not an illusion nor a trick of his eyes or brain. He felt she was as real, as solid, as much flesh and blood as himself, and therefore the more terrible, the more supernatural.

Hargraves, standing rooted there, white, shivering with nameless dread, could not have said why he was so abjectly terrified. The vision was very lovely. She was almost too beautiful, too perfect to be human. Her lips were parted in an alluring, provocative smile, her amber-colored eyes under the long lashes fairly beckoned. But her very beauty and seductiveness held an intangible warning of deadly peril and created the instinctive horror that one feels when gazing at a handsome, sinuous but venomous serpent. Emanating from her, surrounding her like an invisible aura, was an atmosphere of unholy and supernatural devilishness that was more terrible and sinister than anything tangible could have been.

For several seconds she stood motionless, her half-closed eyes gazing at Hargraves who, powerless to move, transfixed, incapable of uttering a sound, stared back at her as if under a hypnotic spell. Then, slowly raising her arms and extending her hands, she glided noiselessly toward him!

The unutterable horror that he had before felt was nothing to the paralyzing fear that gripped him now. He felt riveted to the floor, frozen to the spot, while slowly, with outstretched arms, with parted lips and ardent eyes the hellish being, the diabolically beautiful woman who was not of earth but had arisen from the grave, approached him. He was held as if by some fiendish spell, incapable of escaping, incapable of crying out.

The cloying odor of her perfume was overpowering him, drugging him. His head reeled, he felt as if he must be going mad. A moment more and she would be within reach. Her hands were almost touching him. He could see the rise and fall of her full voluptuous breasts. He could feel her hot breath. Her eyes were looking into his, searing his brain. Then her arms encircled his neck and he felt the pressure of her vivid passionate body against his own. Her parted lips were upturned, seeking—

At the touch of her flesh, stark horror swept over him. Her skin was cold, clammy—the skin of a corpse!

The contact galvanized him into life. He screamed, he struggled and tore madly at those awful arms clasped about his neck.

And then—Oh God!—His hands closed upon dry bones! Skeleton fingers were gripping him, digging into his flesh. Grinning into his face was a hideous, ghastly, eyeless skull!

Mouthing, shrieking like a maniac, he struck out viciously, madly. His fists crashed hollowly against skeletal ribs. The hideous arms fell from his neck. Reeling away from him, he saw a shrunken, desiccated mummified body!

A strange unearthly banshee-like wail rang in his ears. The world went black before his eyes. He staggered, swayed and fell unconscious to the floor.

CHAPTER III - Professor Blackett's Discovery

HARGRAVES came to his senses with a violent start. He felt weak and shaken, and as memory returned his teeth chattered and he shivered with icy chills. Dreading what he might see he opened his eyes and stifled the scream that rose to his lips. The woman bending over him was not that ghastly apparition, but Mrs. Stebbins.

"Thanks be to God!" she exclaimed as she saw he had regained consciousness. "Take this, sir," she lifted his head and placed a glass of brandy to his lips. "I was just about to call for the police or the ambulance," she informed him. "Lord save us, whatever did happen, Mr. Hargraves? I came in to tidy up and found you in a dead swoon on the floor, and a beastly great cat settin' here beside you. How she got in I don't know—what with all the doors locked and the windows screened. And if you'll pardon me for saying so, sir, I'd say, if I didn't know you was a respectable bachelor, and a gentleman if ever there was one, that there'd been a woman in this house. Maybe the cat slipped in along with her. And no good woman at that, sir, judging by the perfume I smelled—strong enough to have knocked me down, it was. But, thanks to

God, you're out from your swoon and all right again now, sir. And no harm done, whatever the strange goings on may have been—Which is no business of mine of course. But—"

The ringing of the door bell interrupted her volubility.

"If that is Professor Blackett have him come in," Hargraves told her as he sat up and glanced furtively about. "And kindly leave us to ourselves, Mrs. Stebbins," he called after her as she hurried off. "I'm all right now. Attack of indigestion, I expect. Sorry I frightened you."

"Why, why! Whatever is the matter?" cried the Egyptologist as he entered the study. "Upon my word. Hargraves, you look really ill. You're as white as if you had seen a ghost."

A shudder swept over Hargraves. With an effort he controlled himself and looked steadily at the scientist. "I have," he said.

"What? What's that?" the other exclaimed. "You—you've—"

"Seen a ghost," Hargraves declared. "I'm serious. Professor I'm going to tell you something that will appear preposterous to you, a scientist. You may think I'm insane—I shall not blame you if you do. But I assure you I'm as sane as anyone, as yourself for example. Neither am I what you might call a drinking man. Doctor Gale says it's nerves—illusions. I know it is not."

"But my dear man, whatever are you driving at?" cried the other.

"That's what I'm about to tell you," replied Hargraves.

Professor Blackett listened silently to the story of his friend's weird, horrible, inexplicable experiences.

"Now what is your honest opinion?" Hargraves asked him when he had told everything.

"It's absolutely astounding!" replied the Egyptologist. "But I agree with your physician. You have been subject to strange—to most distressing and unpleasant hallucinations. Such illusions—"

"Do illusions leave scratches and marks like these?" demanded Hargraves showing Professor Blackett the back of his neck.

"No," admitted the scientist, "but a cat's claws might."

"How about this?" As he spoke Hargraves handed Blackett the golden cat's head he had found on the lounge. "That's no hallucination," he added.

The Egyptologist examined it carefully. "Hmm," he muttered. "It appears to be genuine. But it might have been on the cat's collar as you surmised. As a scientist I do not, will not admit the possibility of anything occult or supernatural. You asked for my candid opinion. It is precisely that of your doctor. You need a change of scene and should give your mind a complete rest."

"I intend to do so," Hargraves assured him. "I'm leaving for California tonight. About that damnable mummy. You're welcome to the whole show—case and all."

Professor Blackett fairly beamed with delight. "Really, I cannot find words to express my—the museum's gratitude," he exclaimed.

"Don't bother to try," said Hargraves. "Only get the damned thing out of here. I never want to see it or hear of it again. And if you find that beastly cat drown her, shoot her, chloroform her—anything to make sure she'll never come back."

ONCE more in his office at the museum, with the precious mummy case safe within the walls of the institution, Professor Blackett searched among his books until he found the one he sought. Running his eyes over the index he turned to a page bearing the heading: "RET-SEH."

"The favorite concubine of Ptonomah II," he read. "Famed for her great beauty and as a sorceress. It is related that by means of her magic she could transform herself into a cat. Thus disguised she would pass boldly through the royal chambers and from the palace and would meet her lovers whom she would seduce by appearing to them in her natural form."

"Hmm, an all-around bad egg, I should say," commented the scientist as he turned the page.

"It is further recorded," he read on, "that her infidelity having been discovered by the king, he determined to put her to death. But bewitched by her charms and beauty, he found it impossible to destroy her while in human form. So, concealing himself, he waited until she appeared as a cat, whereupon he fell upon her and killed her."

Professor Blackett closed the volume. "Astounding!" he muttered as he replaced the book on its shelf. "A remarkable coincidence, but of course merely a coincidence—nothing more. Strange though, very strange! I think it is just as well that I did not mention that silly old legend to Hargraves."

Neither did he ever tell Hargraves that when the mummy case was opened and the wrappings were removed, it was found to contain a most perfectly preserved mummy of—a huge tortoise shell cat!