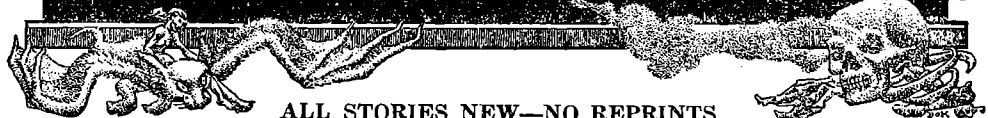


Weird Tales



MAY, 1941

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"The ticket was snatched from my hand."

The Ghost of a Chance

By A. B. ALMY

"A skeleton in the closet?" That's nothing to a mummy in the breast pocket!

DON'T ask me why I went to the Charity Bazaar that evening. By rights, I should have gone to bed early. I had used all my energy and ingenuity that day in my effort to break down sales-resistance to the purchase of the Acrecom, the niftiest, most up-to-date, comfort-

bringing, accident-reducing, auto-gadget in existence.

I was standing on the street corner, top-coat on arm, gladstone at side, waiting for a taxi to show up. In spite of the tooting of auto-horns and the roar of electric-cars, oddly, at times, I could hear the

horse-chestnuts dropping to the ground from the trees in the center-parking. The fact is, I was becoming gradually relaxed. In this pleasurable state of mind and body, I must have let several taxis pass unnoticed.

Suddenly I became aware that someone had jostled against me. It must have been one of the two girls who were just then passing. They were talking at the top of their voices. I couldn't help hearing them:

"I bet there'll be a lot of folks at the Bazaar tonight. Won't we have a swell time!"

"You said it. It's the last night, too. They're going to raffle off that horrible thing, you know."

"Mercy! You give me the shivers! I wouldn't want to get it. Just feature—"

That's all I heard plainly. A taxi was at hand. I half raised my hand to hail it, yet, when it was on the point of stopping, I motioned for it to go on. Why did I? Because, for some reason, I felt the compulsion to follow those two girls whose conversation I had partly overheard. As they had been dawdling along, they were now only a block or so from where I had been standing. I could easily pick them out from the crowd by their red, ruffled, knee-short dresses and their black cocked-hats. Twins, very likely. Even if I had lost sight of them, I'm quite certain, knowing what I now know, that I would have gone their way and arrived at their destination. They had said that they were going to the Charity Bazaar. I knew that I was bound for the same place. Don't ask me how I knew.

Presently the two girls disappeared. I went on, not hurrying particularly. My alligator-bag was becoming heavy.

And now, I had arrived at the place. The building was large, brilliantly lighted. I pushed my way up the steps and into the main hall.

It was a regular old-fashioned lodge bazaar, or fair, you might call it. There

were booths of every kind, swathed in colored bunting and paper. There were balsam pillows, crazy-quilts, aprons galore, woven baskets—in fact, doodads of every description. There was the clatter of cups and plates. An orchestra that no one was listening to was adding to the hubbub. Indeed, there was the usual confusion and, everywhere, the usual bevy of marcelled young women begging you to buy something. And, what was still more old-fashioned, there was the selling of chances, or tickets, for articles more or less useless, especially, to the male sex.

In the midst of this hubbub, I was calm. I disposed of my coat and baggage at the decorated check-stand. I took time to eat a sizeable chicken-pie and to down the strongest cup of coffee within my experience. After that, I went directly to the farther end of the long hall. Here, was the bazaar of curiosities, as it was called. There were all sorts of things—grotesque tea-pots, tobacco—pipes of every imaginable shape and country, queer-shaped brass and pottery vessels, Chinese, Peruvian—who knows from where they all came? Of course, there were tigers' teeth, elephants' tusks, stuffed birds, petrified fish. Why name them all? They meant nothing to me at the time, nor do they now.

I LEARNED, from the large poster above the booth, that this miscellany of objects had been donated, to be sold for charity, by a distinguished gentleman, Mr. Frederick Rawlins, world-renowned traveler and philanthropist. After a cursory glance at this hodge-podge of stuff, I gave my attention to one object alone. The thing was an Egyptian mummy. It was propped up in a wooden box painted white inside, the better to display its lineaments. One of the mummy's arms was merged with its shriveled breast. The other hung somewhat apart from the body, like a rope of brown, twisted hemp, with a knot at

the end. That knot, I perceived, was a hand. I was fascinated by that hand.

I leaned over the wooden hand-rail, only a few inches from that brown, shrunken thing. More than once, I have been told that, by nature, I am rather cold and unsympathetic. However that may be, I was immediately overwhelmed with sympathy for this mummy. Poor fellow! It's bad enough to be buried in the ground, but how much worse it is to have one's body salted and dried and packed away in some stifling vault, only to be dragged out again, some thousands of years later, and treated like so much merchandise. How humiliating to be displayed before the curious eyes of a callous mob, who see nothing in you but a lump of cinnamon-colored leather with features like no human being.

As I continued to stare at the mummy, I became convinced that, in life, he had been an exceptionally intelligent man. In that shrunken head, I pictured a philosopher's brow. What an insult to raffle off his body as if it were a mere patch-work quilt. Yet, that is exactly what they were doing.

I was besieged by ticket-sellers. "Buy a chance! Buy a chance for the Egyptian mummy!"

"No, thank you. No."

"A ticket for the mummy, sir? A mummy ticket, before they're all gone!"

"No! No, I say!"

As I was turning away from the rail to dismiss the importunate ticket sellers, someone touched me on the arm. Who was it? I didn't see the person. However, that touch impelled me to call out, "Here, I'll take one of those mummy tickets!"

Three girls rushed up to me. I deliberately waited until another one came up. "I'll take my ticket from you," I indicated. I reached my hand into her tin coffee-can and extracted a ticket. It was number 321. I placed it in my bill-fold.

I was ready to go now.

All the while that I was in the taxi on my way to the hotel, I cursed myself for being so foolish as to take in that lodge affair. Twice, I took out the ticket to tear it to pieces, but, instead of doing so, I replaced it, un mutilated. I know, now, that I could as readily have torn an iron bar to shreds as that ticket.

As I said before, I had had an exceptionally difficult day. Once in bed, I fell asleep immediately. Soon, however, I became restless. I dreamed fitfully of sarcophagi and mummies and ticket-girls and huge chicken-pies.

I AWOKE, suddenly. Someone was getting into bed with me. The nerve of it! I had engaged a single room and paid plenty for it. It was inky dark in the room, so I didn't see the person. Why didn't the fellow finish getting in if that was what he was bent on doing? Queer, this getting in and yet, not getting in—exactly.

I had a sickish feeling. I reached over. Nothing was there. Yet, the bed was creaking. There was a depression, too, as if—as if what? I could scarcely breathe. But someone else was breathing. It was the breath of mummy pits.

I thought that my heart had stopped beating. Yet, after a moment or so, I felt it still functioning. "I must be calm. Calm," my mind registered. "No matter what happens. I must keep a clear head."

That steady breathing at my side. That cavernous breathing. "Don't get excited," I admonished myself. So, by sheer will-power, I worked myself up to the point where I saw the situation. The ticket! I had drawn the lucky ticket! The joke was on me. Up to now, I had always been able to take a joke. That's why I had become such a successful salesman.

I didn't know a word of Egyptian. I could try English.

"Who are you?" I asked in a kind of

gasping way. I really didn't expect a reply.

"Shafra Tatkerah Ptah-hotep," came in a fungus-like voice. "If that's too long for you, you may call me Shafra Tatkerah, when you're in a hurry. Ptah-hotep is my family name."

I just lay there, too weak to move. The breathing became louder. "I said you may call me Shafra Tatkerah for short. Didn't you hear me?"

"Y-yes. I was only—I was only wondering where you learned to speak English."

"To be sure, that's only natural. Well, I don't intend to tell you everything. Even my favorite wife, most precious lotus blossom of all lotus blossoms, Hespera Nekata, never did know more than a hint of all my goings on. You're shivering. Here, I don't need any blankets. The fact is, I've picked up English ever since I left the tombs. We'll skip telling how long a time that is. To tell the truth, I've been attached, more or less intimately, with thirteen individuals, since then. Two of them were women."

The bed was shaking, though I didn't hear any laughing. After a moment, he burst out, "Ha! Ha! Ha! Those tombs! That painted sarcophagus! There's nothing in the world like it. Quite jolly! Speak English, do I? A little French, too. The Russian language was the hardest. But, really, I owe my excellent English to Frederick Rawlins. I spent more time with him than with anyone else. You are acquainted with him, I suppose?"

I said "No," but so faintly that he failed to hear. He leaned over and repeated the question. I didn't want him to do that again.

"No!" I shouted, and, with that, almost passed out.

"Don't be childish. I hardly expected you'd know him. He's an exceptional person. Likes to delve into out-of-the-way

places and collect valuable curiosities. He's lousy rich but it hasn't spoiled him. Very kind-hearted, too, or he wouldn't be donating me and all those other choice bits to charity." Again, that dreadful silent laughter. "You do realize, don't you, that it was merely his philanthropic sense that made him part with me? We were together thirty-four congenial months. And now, I'm with you."

I groaned inwardly.

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" This time, aloud.

I couldn't keep my teeth from clicking.

"There's no reason to be stand-offish, Mister— What is your name? And your business?"

"My name's Anthony Charleston. I travel for the Bickwell-Crowder Company; producers of the Acrecom, the niftiest, most up-to-date, comfort-bringing, accident-reducing, auto gadget in existence. In fact, the Acrecom has reduced auto accidents—"

"Hold on, Charleston, I'm not interested in that line of talk."

If I could have choked him, I would have. Instead, I asked boldly, "Aren't you sleepy, Mr. Shafra Hottep?"

"Shafra Tatkerah, I told you. No, I'm not sleepy. Three thousand-seven-hundred-and-eleven years in a carved sarcophagus is some rest, believe me. The truth is, I'm never sleepy."

I drew a breath of despair.

"See here, if you're tired, go ahead and sleep."

"Thanks." I turned over on my side. Sleep. How could I sleep? I was afraid to breathe for fear he'd think I wasn't asleep, and afraid not to breathe for the same reason. If I only could sleep!

The clock on the stand near the bed had a phosphorescent dial. One o'clock. Two o'clock. That thing at my side was restless, too. My eyes kept staring at the clock. By three o'clock, I had become stiff as a board. Four o'clock. I hadn't sup-

posed that there were any roosters in the heart of a metropolis, but there seemed to be. A breath escaped me.

"Hear that?" came a chuckle at my side. "Would you believe it?"

I didn't reply. Heavens, was he telepathic? Was I to have no peace, sleeping or awake? I was so tense, I felt as if, at any moment, I might crack into pieces.

Presently, there was such utter silence and lack of stir, that I believed that Shafra Tatkera himself had fallen asleep, if such a thing were possible.

Four-thirty o'clock. I had a wild idea. I was going to escape. I got up softly.

"Heigh-o, friend Anthony! I hope nothing I've done has disturbed you."

"Oh, no," I said nonchalantly, through dry lips. "I've always liked the morning air. Besides, I like to get an early start—the early bird, you know." I was trying to be jaunty, but I was merely vapid. The bed shook with insulting laughter.

AFTER I was dressed, I opened up my sample-case and arranged papers. The sight of my Acrecoms, usually so inspiring, produced only a dull heaviness in me. What was going to happen to me and to them? I had a premonition that I was facing ruin, both business, and domestic. What of Harriet, my devoted wife, and Jimmy and little Prudy? I drew a deep sigh.

"Excuse me, will you, if I talk to you from the bed? No need for me to get up yet. However, we've got to attend to something. I suppose, naturally, that you're wondering what you're going to do with me. At the start, we don't seem to be particularly attracted to each other. That will change, in time, we hope. Cheer up, Anthony. I'll not talk to you much through the day. I'll just accompany you silently."

I had a touch of nausea, for the moment.

"Do you have your mummy ticket at hand?" As I didn't answer, he repeated,

sharply, "Let's see your ticket. It's number 321."

As if I had no will of my own, I took the accursed ticket from my billfold.

"All right," I said. I held it out over the bed. My hand was shaking.

The ticket was snatched from my hand. "It's O. K." Ticket 321 was again in my hand. Now, in spite of all that had occurred up to this moment, I had still been trying to believe that I was under some inexplicable spell of hallucination. Now, after this ticket business, I knew that the mummy's ghost was actually with me.

I made a sickly attempt to be facetious: "Well, where do we go from here? So what?"

"Very well, the first thing for you to do is to go and get my mummy. They won't mind getting rid of it, I fancy. You'll get my mummy and then—"

"And then what?" I interrupted, hoping for deliverance.

"Why then, you and I will be able to settle down to normal life, the routine of business."

"Oh—" I checked a groan. I was praying silently, "O Lord, Lord, how long!" I had a right to pray. And, I might as well say now, that, in the days and weeks that followed, I exercised that privilege to the utmost, but always silently. "Lord, O Lord, help me get rid of this horrible pest." But, I don't wish to anticipate. However, this I will say, Shafra Tatkera was telepathic.

Not to go into detail, in some way or other, I got Shafra Tatkera's visible substance up into my room. Notwithstanding strenuous objections on his part, I managed to pack him into my medium-size sample-case, which I then pushed into the dark end of the closet. Excepting for an ancient, undefinable odor that some people might not even have detected, but which to me, smelt down to the most noxious pit, I and my Acrecoms might, to the ordi-

nary observer, have been occupying the room alone.

Speak of a skeleton in the closet. What is that to a mummy!

I was due to leave the city the next day. I mean, the day after the establishment of Shafra Tatkera into my privacy. Only by the most dogged determination, did I succeed in getting off my monthly report. I had the hardihood, too, to keep several engagements early in the day, to clear up orders that had been hanging fire. Shafra Tatkera went with me everywhere. I smelt him, I heard him, I breathed him. I was convinced that my clients were unaware of his presence. I, however, being all too aware of him, found myself replying to his insinuations, aloud. How could I explain to some client that my sudden imprecations, my hitting out into apparently thin air, were caused by a creature, invisible to him, but disagreeably actual to myself?

That night, when I reached my room—*he* called it *our* room—I was utterly shot to pieces.

I SLEPT without dreaming. I awoke, however, when the city rooster crowed. For a few blissful moments I lay there, not feeling, not thinking. Then, it all came back to me with a shock. The ticket. The mummy in my sample-case. Shafra Tatkera in bed with me. My business, my unmatched Acrecoms, the niftiest, most up-to-date, comfort-bringing—but I could not think of them now. My darling Harriet, Jimmy and Little Prudy. "O God, get rid of this horrible Shafra Tatkera. Rid me of—"

"Good morning, Anthony!"

I couldn't even pray with, you might say, privacy.

Again, I got up at four-thirty.

"Bright day, isn't it, friend Anthony, to be up and about so early? You're bound to sell your gadgets today."

I wondered. Could this early rising really offset my terrible handicap?

I tried business again that day. This time, I—we—set off at noon. Somehow or other, I couldn't summon courage to go earlier. It might have been all right if I had been able to ignore absolutely Shafra Tatkera's presence. But how could I? He talked to me almost incessantly. When I couldn't restrain myself longer, I answered him. People were beginning to think that I was demented. I saw their expressions. I heard their remarks. I became afraid. I sweated. A little more of this thing and I might find myself in an insane asylum.

The night of this day was like that first one when Shafra Tatkera had intruded himself into my companionship. I couldn't sleep. Would I ever be able to sleep again? Would life ever be sweet and normal again?

"When you become used to me, you'll sleep like a child," came the unasked-for consolation in answer to my thoughts. I noticed that it was only two o'clock.

I couldn't move. I couldn't think. "O—" I couldn't even pray.

"Yes, friend, you'll get as used to me as to an old shoe." He gave a rasping laugh. "Frederick Rawlins became used to me. I believe he found me rather interesting from a scientific point of view. Fine old fellow, he was. You, too, have possibilities of companionship, if you'll only buck up."

Not to become tiresome with detail, I can readily sum up the facts.

I became a hermit in my room at the Palace Hotel. Exercising all kinds of subterfuge, I arranged with the Bickwell-Crowder Acrecom Company for a leave of absence. With even more subterfuge, I sadly laid the stage for an indefinite absence from Harriet and the children. I who had always abhorred deceit, lied consummately. Shafra Tatkera admired my skill in this respect, he said.

And so the days passed. Night, morning, noon, afternoon, night again, morning. I—we went out only for meals and the most insistent errands. If there could be any comfort in such a situation, it was that Shafra Tatkerá was really a ghost, invisible, requiring neither food nor clothing. Each time I left my room, I returned to it as to a refuge.

A week passed. Two weeks went by. Three. A month passed by the calendar. I was becoming accustomed to the situation, as a prisoner grows used to his bars. And yet, thank heaven, I remained rebellious.

I kept trying to throw off that insidious something that was drying me up, and yet that was giving me the feeling of being choked with a stale mustiness. As for the Acrecoms, however, I lost all interest in what I used to think were the niftiest, most up-to-date— Oh, what was the use of bothering with them?

Two months passed. I realized that only by remaining conscious of my intolerable situation, could I hope to save myself. "Lord, Lord, help me get rid of this creature—" Every time that I cried out in my heart, Shafra Tatkerá became sulky. He argued with me. He became insulting. I could be thankful for one thing: while he was able to hurl newspapers about the room, he never so much as lifted a heavy object to cudgel me. I am convinced that he was unable to lift anything excepting the lightest weight. Parenthetically, Shafra Tatkerá had a passion for newspapers. He read them from the first to the last page.

The days went by, well into the third month. Shafra Tatkerá was becoming increasingly annoying. He now kept insisting that I go out on the road again. He kept talking Acrecoms to me. He extolled their virtues, even telling me that they were the niftiest, most up-to-date, comfort-bringing, accident-reducing auto gadgets in ex-

istence. I never wanted to hear those words again. "Get out and around, you rabbit. We can swell the sales of Acrecoms for the company so they'll make us president in just a short time. Buck up."

I remained deaf to his arguments and appeals. I would never, as long as I was cursed with him, go out on the road. I wasn't going to risk getting stuck into an asylum.

The fact is, Shafra Tatkerá was actually becoming bored with me. It was a refreshing idea. It encouraged me. "I'll get rid of him some way or other," I vowed secretly. "The other thirteen persons found some way of doing it, and so shall I. But, not by way of the road, of that, I'm certain."

Every day, now, and off and on, in the night, Shafra Tatkerá took to harping on that one subject: "Get out on the road. Sell your Acrecoms. They're the niftiest, most up-to-date—"

I would clap my hands over my ears. "No! No! I'll not go on the road. Nothing can make me sell Acrecoms."

Such was the situation when we had been together three months, lacking only two and a half days.

IT WAS nearly lunch time. In a few minutes we would be going out to the Elite Café, just around the corner. Shafra Tatkerá was quiet, deeply absorbed in the funnies.

Suddenly the fire-siren sounded. Louder it came. Louder, and, with it, came the noise of the engines and trucks. I ran to the window. A crowd was gathering below us. The Palace Hotel was on fire. Already the alarm was sounding through our halls. For all its class, the Palace was an old building. It would burn like tinder. I must escape! But not with the mummy! There wasn't time to grab up anything.

I ran into the corridor.

"My mummy! Save my mummy!" came shrieking into my ear.

I paid no attention. Smoke was seeping up and through the narrow halls. I ran to the elevator. Others sought the same way of escape, but as instantly as we arrived at the shaft we recognized the futility of that means of escape. In a few minutes the elevators would be wells of flame.

Frantically, I started down the stairway, and, all this time, Shafra Tatkera was with me, screaming, "Get my mummy! Save my mummy!" In a frenzy of terror, he waved his funny paper in front of my face. I hurried on, unheeding.

"I say, get it! Get it before it's too late!"

"No! No!" I shouted. We had reached the lobby. It was a thickening mass of

smoke. Red tips were showing about the elevator openings.

I was in the street now, amidst the confusion.

Then, from across the street, I stood watching the flames lick up the walls of our wing of The Palace.

"My mummy! My mummy!" I still heard his wailing shriek. Still, the funny paper, now almost in tatters, was beating the air.

"Save it! Oh—"

All at once I felt a deep relief. Our wing of The Palace went down with a roaring crash.

I was free!

To this day there is no sound that thrills me more than that of a fire-siren. Again, I feel that sudden sense of relief. Believe it or not, just as you will.
