The Mysterious Mummy

Sax Rohmer

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It was about five o'clock on a hot August afternoon, that a tall, thin man, wearing a weedy beard, and made conspicious by an ill−fitting frock−coat and an almost napless silk hat, walked into the entrance hall of the Great Portland Square Museum. He carried no stick, and, looking about him, as though unfamiliar with the building, he ultimately mounted the principal staircase, walking with a pronounced stoop, and at intervals coughing with a hollow sound.

His gaunt figure attracted the attention of several people, among them the attendant in the Egyptain room. Hardened though he was to the eccentric in humanity, the man who hung so eagerly over the mummies of departed kings and coughed so frequently, nevertheless secured his instant attention. Visitors of the regulation type were rapidly thinning out, so that the gaunt man, during the whole of the time he remained in the room, was kept under close surveillance by the vigilant official. Seeing him go in the direction of the stairs, the attendant supposed the strange visitor to be about to leave the Museum. But that he did not immediately do so was shown by subsequent testimony.

The day's business being concluded, the staff of police who patrol nightly the Great Square Museum duly filed into the building. A man is placed in each room, it being his duty to examine thoroughly every nook and cranny; having done which, all doors of communication are closed, the officer on guard in one room being unable to leave his post or to enter another. Every hour the inspector, a sergeant, and a fireman make a round of the entire building: from which it will be seen that a person having designs on any of the numerous treasures of the place would require more than average ingenuity to bring his plans to a successful issue.

In recording this very singular case, the only incident of the night to demand attention is that of the mummy in the Etruscan room.

Persons familiar with the Great Portland Square Museum will know that certain of the tombs in the Etruscan room are used as receptacles for Egyptian mummies that have, for various reasons, never been put upon exhibition. Anyone who has peered under the partially raised lid of a huge sarcophagus and found within the rigid form of a mummy, will appreciate the feelings of the man on night duty amid surroundings so lugubrious. The electric light, it should be mentioned, is not extinguished until the various apartments have been examined, and its extinction immediately precedes the locking of the door.

The constable in the Etruscan room glanced into the various sarcophagi and cast the rays of his bull's−eye lantern into the shadows of the great stone tombs. Satisfied that no one lurked there, he mounted the steps leading up to the Roman gallery, turning out the lights in the room below from the switch at the top. The light was still burning on the ground floor, and the sergeant had not yet arrived with the keys. It was whilst the man stood awaiting his coming that a singular thing occurred.

From somewhere within the darkened chamber beneath, there came the sound of a hollow cough!

By no means deficient in courage, the constable went down the steps in three bounds, his lantern throwing discs of light on stately statues and gloomy tombs. The sound was not repeated:

and having nothing to guide him to its source, he commenced a second methodical search of the sarcophagi, as offering the most likely hiding places. When all save one had been examined, the constable began to believe that the coughing had existed only in his imagination. It was upon casting the rays of his bull's−eye into the last sarcophagus that he experienced a sudden sensation of fear. It was empty; yet he distinctly remembered, from his previous examination, that a mummy had lain there!

At the moment of making this weird discovery, he realised that he would have done better, before commencing his search for the man with the cough, first to turn on the light; for it must be remembered that he

had extinguished the electric lamps. Determined to do so before pursuing his investigations further, he ran up the steps—to find the Roman gallery in darkness. The bright disc of a lantern was approaching from the upper end, and the man ran forward.

'Who turned off the lights here?' came the voice of the sergeant.

'That's what I want to know! Somebody did it while I was downstairs!' said the constable, and gave a hurried account of the mysterious coughing and the missing mummy.

'How long has there been a mummy in this tomb?' asked the sergeant.

'There was one there a month back, but they took it upstairs. They may have brought it down again last week though, or it may have been a fresh one. You see, the other lot were on duty up to last night.'

This was quite true, as the sergeant was aware. Three bodies of picked men share the night duties at the Great Portland Square Museum, and those on duty upon this particular occasion had not been in the place during the previous two weeks.

'Very strange!' muttered the sergeant; and a moment later his whistle was sounding.

From all over the building men came running, for none of the doors had yet been locked.

'There seems to be someone concealed in the Museum: search all the rooms again!' was the brief order.

The constables disappeared, and the sergeant, accompanied by the inspector, went down to examine the Etruscan room. Nothing was found there; nor were any of the other searchers more successful. There was no trace anywhere of a man in hiding. Beyond leaving open the door between the Roman gallery and the steps of the Etruscan room, no more could be done in the matter. The gallery communicates with the entrance hall, where the inspector, together with the sergeant and fireman, spends the night, and the idea of the former was to keep in touch with the scene of these singular happenings. His action was perfectly natural; but these precautions were subsequently proved to be absolutely useless.

The night passed without any disturbing event, and the mystery of the vanishing mummy and the ghostly cough seemed likely to remain a mystery. The night−police filed out in the early morning, and the inspector, with the sergeant, returned, as soon as possible, to the Museum, to make further inquiries concerning the missing occupant of the sarcophagus.

'A mummy in the end tomb!' exclaimed the curator of Etruscan antiquities; 'my dear sir, there has been no mummy there for nearly a month!'

'But my man states that he saw one there last night!' declared the inspector.

The curator looked puzzled. Turning to an attendant, he said: 'Who was in charge of the Etruscan room immediately before six last night?'

'I was, sir!'

'Were there any visitors?'

'No one came in between five−forty and six.'

'And before that?'

'I was away at tea, sir!'

'Who was in charge then?'

'Mr Robins.'

'Call Robins.'

The commissionaire in question arrived.

'How long were you in the Etruscan room last night?'

'About half−an−hour, sir.'

'Are you sure that no one concealed himself?'

The man looked startled. 'Well, sir,' he said hesitatingly, 'I'm sorry I didn't report it before; but when Mr Barton called me, at about twenty−five minutes to six, there was someone there, a gent in a seedy frock−coat and a high hat, and I don't remember seeing him come out.'

'Did you search the room?'

'Yes, sir; but there was no one to be seen!'

'You should have reported the matter at once. I must see Barton.'

Barton, the head attendant, remembered speaking to Robins at the top of the steps leading to the Etruscan

room. He saw no one come out, but it was just possible for a person to have done so and yet be seen by neither himself nor Robins.

'Let three of you thoroughly overhaul the room for any sign of a man having hidden there,' directed the curator briskly.

He turned to the sergeant and inspector with a smile, 'I rather fancy it will prove to be a mare's nest!' he said. 'We have had these mysteries before.'

The words had but just left his lips when a Museum official, a well−known antiquarian expert, ran up in a perfect frenzy of excitement. 'Good heavens, Peters!' he gasped. 'The Rienzi Vase has gone!'

'What!' came an incredulous chorus.

'The circular top of the case has been completely cut out and ingeniously replaced, and a plausible imitation of the vase substituted!'

They waited for no more, but hurried upstairs to the Vase room, which, in the Great Portland Square Museum, is really only a part of the Egyptian room. The Rienzi Vase, though no larger than an ordinary breakfast−cup, all the world knows to be of fabulous value. It seemed inconceivable that anyone could have stolen it. Yet there, in the midst of a knot of excited officials, stood the empty case, whilst the imitation antique was being passed from hand to hand.

Never before nor since has such a scene been witnessed in the Museum. The staff, to a man, had lost their wits. What is to be done? was the general inquiry. In less than half an hour the doors would have to be opened to the public, and the absence of the famous vase would inevitably be noticed. It was at this juncture, and whilst everyone was speaking at once, that one of the party, standing close to a wall−cabinet, suddenly held up a warning finger. 'Hush!' he said; 'listen!'

A sudden silence fell upon the room so that people running about in other apartments could be plainly heard. And presently, from somewhere behind the glass doors surrounding the place, came a low moan, electrifying the already excited listeners. The keys were promptly forthcoming and then was made the second astounding discovery of the eventful morning.

A man, gagged and bound, was imprisoned behind a great mummy case!

Eager hands set to work to release him, and restoratives were applied, as he seemed to be in a very weak condition. He was but partially dressed, and breathed heavily through his nose, like a man in a drunken slumber. All waited breathlessly for his return to consciousness; for certainly he, if anyone, should be in a position to furnish some clue to the deep mystery. On regaining his senses, he had disappointingly little to tell. He was Constable Smith, who had been on night−duty in the Egyptian room. Sometime during the first hour, and not long after the alarm in the basement, he had been mysteriously pinioned as he paraded the apartment. He caught no glimpse of his opponent, who held him from behind in such a manner that he was totally unable to defend himself. Some sweet−smelling drug had been applied to his nostrils, and he remembered no more until regaining consciousness in the mummy case! That was the whole of his testimony. In setting out the particulars of this remarkable affair, a third and final discovery must be noted. The three men who had been directed to examine the Etruscan room brought to light a bundle of old garments, containing an ancient opera−hat, a faded frock−coat, a pair of shiny trousers, and a pair of elastic−sided boots. They were wedged high up at the back of a tall statue, where they had evidently escaped the eyes of all previous searchers. That constituted the entire data on which investigations had to be based. The Egyptain room was closed indefinitely, 'for repairs.' No further useful evidence could be obtained from anyone. Several witnesses furnished consistent descriptions of the shabby stranger with the hollow cough; but it may here be mentioned that no one of them ever set eyes upon him again. The inspector, the sergeant, and the fireman solemnly swore to having visited the Egyptian room at the end of each hour throughout the night, and to having found the constable on duty as usual! Smith swore, with equal solemnity, that he had been drugged during the first hour and subsequently confined in the mummy case.

The matter was carefully kept out of the papers, although the Museum, throughout many following days, positively bristled with detectives. As the second week drew to a close and the Egyptian room still remained locked, well−informed persons began to whisper that a scandal could no longer be avoided. There can be no doubt that, in many quarters, Constable Smith's share in the proceedings was regarded with grave suspicion. It was at this critical juncture, when it seemed inevitable that the loss of the world−famous Rienzi Vase must be made known to an unsympathetic public, that certain high authorities gave out that the vase had been removed, and that

none of the night staff were in any way implicated in its disappearance!

On this announcement being made, several strange theories were mooted. Some stated that the vase had never left the Museum! Others averred that it had been pawned to a foreign government!

Whatever the real explanation, and the secret was jealously guarded by the highly−placed officials who alone knew the truth, suffice it that the Egyptian room was again thrown open and the Rienzi Vase shown to be reposing in its usual position.

Now that it again stands in its place for all to see, there can be no objection to my relating how I once held the famous Reinzi Vase in my possession for twelve days. If there be any objection. . .

I am sorry. You must understand that I am no common thief—no footpad: I am a person of keenly observant character, and my business is to detect vital weaknesses in great institutions and to charge a moderately high fee for my services. Thus I discovered that a certain famous tiara in a French museum was inadequately protected, and accordingly removed it, replacing it by a substitute. The authorities refused me my fee, and all the world knows that my clever forgery was detected by the experts. That brought them to their senses; it is the genuine tiara that reposes in their cabinet now!

In the same way I removed a world−renowned, historical mummy from its resting place in Cairo, and two days later they grew suspicious of my imitation—it was the handiwork of a clever Birmingham artist—and the department was closed. The bulky character of the mummy nearly brought about my downfall, and it was only by abandoning it that I succeeded in leaving Cairo. I am not proud of that case; I was clumsy. But of the case of the Rienzi Vase I have every reason to be highly proud. That you may judge of the neatness and dispatch with which I acted, I will relate how the whole business was conducted.

You must know, then, that the first flaw I discovered in the arrangements at the Great Portland Square Museum was this: the wall−cases were badly guarded. I learnt this interesting fact one afternoon as I strolled about the Egyptian room. A certain gentleman—I will not name him—was showing a party of ladies round the apartment. He had unlocked a wall−case, and was standing with a handsome bead−necklet in his hand, explaining where and when it was found. He was only a few yards away, but with his back toward the case. Enough! The key, with others attached, was in the glass door. You will admit that this was exceedingly careless; but the presence of four charming American ladies . . . one can excuse him!

I regret to have to confess that I was somewhat awkward—the keys rattled. The whole party looked in my direction. But the immaculate man−about−town, with his cultivated manner and his very considerable knowledge of Egyptology—how should they suspect? I apologised; I had brushed against them in passing; I made myself agreeable, and the uncomfortable incident was forgotten, by them—not by me. I had a beautiful wax impression to keep my memory fresh!

The scheme formed then. I knew that a body of picked police promenaded the Museum at night, and that each of the rooms was usually in charge of the same man. I learnt, later, that there were three bodies of men, so that the same police were in the Museum but one week in every three. I made the acquaintance of seven constables and frequented eight different public−houses before I met the man of whom I was in search.

The first policeman I found, who paraded the Egyptian room at night, was short and thick−set, and I gave him up as a bad job. I learnt from him, however, who was to occupy the post during the coming week, and presently I unearthed the private bar which this latter officer, his name was Smith, used. Eureka! He was tall and thin. Incidentally, he was also surly. But the winning ways of the jovial master−plumber, who was so free with his money, ultimately thawed him.

Every night throughout the rest of the week I spent in this constable's company, studying his somewhat colourless personality. Then, one afternoon, I entered the Museum. My weedy beard, my gaunt expression, and my hollow cough—they were all in the part! I went up to the Egyptian room to assure myself that a certain mummy case had not been removed, and having found it to occupy its usual place, I descended to the Etruscan basement.

For half−an−hour I occupied myself there, but the commissionaire never budged from his seat. I knew that this particular man was only in temporary charge whilst another was at tea, for I was well posted, and wondered if his companion were ever coming back. Luckily, an incident occurred to serve my purpose. The chief attendant appeared at the head of the steps. 'Robins!' he called.

Robins ran briskly upstairs at his command, and then—in fifteen seconds my transformation was complete.

Gone were the weedy grey beard and moustache—gone the seedy, black garments and the elastic−sided boots—gone the old opera−hat—and, behold, I was Constable Smith, attired in mummy wrappings!

An acrobatic spring, and the bundle of aged garments was wedged behind a tall statue, where nothing but a most minute search could reveal it. Down again, not a second to spare! Into the empty sarcophagus at the further end of the room; and, lastly, a hideous rubber mask slipped over the ruddy features of Constable Smith and attached behind the ears, my arms stiffened and my hands concealed in the wrappings, and I was a long−dead mummy—with a neat leather case hidden beneath my arched back!.Brisk work, I assure you; but one grows accustomed to it in time. The commissionaire entered the room very shortly afterwards. He had not seen me go out, but, as I expected, neither was he absolutely sure that I had not done so. He peered about suspiciously, but I did not mind. The real ordeal came a couple of hours later, when a police officer flashed his lantern into all the tombs.

For a moment my heart seemed to cease beating as the light shone on my rubber countenance.

But he was satisfied, this stupid policeman, and I heard his footsteps retreating to the door. I allowed him time to get to the top, and extinguished the light in the Etruscan room, and then. . . I was out of my tomb and hidden in the little niche immediately beside the foot of the stairs. I coughed loudly. Heavens! He came back down the steps with such velocity that he was carried halfway along the room. He began to flash his lantern into the tombs again; but, before he had examined the first of them, I was upstairs in the Roman gallery!

Without the electric light it was quite dark in the Etruscan room, which is in the basement; but, being a bright night, I knew I could find what I required in the Roman gallery without the aid of artificial light; besides, I had not to act in the open—someone might arrive too soon. So, thoroughly well posted as to the situation of the switches, I extinguished the lamps, and dodged in among the Roman stonework to the foot of a great pillar, towering almost to the lofty roof and surmounted by an ornate capital.

I had planned all this beforehand, you see; but I must confess it was an awful scramble to the top. I had only just curled up on the summit, the handle of my invaluable leather−case held fast in my teeth, when a sergeant came running down the gallery, almost into the arms of the constable who was running up the steps from the Etruscan room.

A moment's hurried conversation, and then the lights turned on and the sound of a whistle. It was foolish, of course; but I had expected it. From all over the building the police arrived, and, fatigued as I was with my climb, yet another acrobatic feat was before me.

The top of my pillar was no great distance from the stone balustrade of the first−floor landing, on which the Egyptian room opens, and a narrow ledge, perhaps of eleven inches, runs all round the wall of the Roman gallery some four feet below the ceiling. I cautiously stepped from the pillar to the ledge—I was invisible from the other end of the place—and, pressing my body close against the wall, reached the balustrade. Before Constable Smith—who had left his post and descended to the lower gallery on hearing the sergeant's whistle—re−entered the Egyptian room, my bright, new key had found the lock of a certain cabinet, and I was secure behind a mummy case—whilst a little steel pin prevented the spring of the lock from shutting me in.

Poor Constable Smith! I was sorry to have to act so: but, ten minutes after the closing of the doors of communication, I came on him from behind, having silently crept from the case as he passed me, and followed him down the darkened room, the thin linen wrappings that covered my feet making no sound upon the wooden floor. I had a pad ready in my hand, saturated with the contents of a small phial that had reposed in my mummy garments.

I thrust my knee in his spine and seized his hands by a trick which you may learn for a peseta any day in the purlieus of Tangier. A muscular man, he tried hard to cope with his unseen opponent; but the pad never left his mouth and nostrils, and the few muffled cries that escaped him were luckily unheard. He soon became unconscious, and I had to work hard lest the inspector should make his round before I was ready for him. The mummy case had to be lowered on to the floor, and the heavy body tightly bound and lifted into it, then stood up again and securely locked behind the glass doors. It was hot work, and I had but just accomplished the task and climbed into the constable's uniform, when the inspector's key sounded in the door. Ah! it is an exciting profession!.The rest was easy. Wrapped up in my yellow mummy linen were the various appliances I required, and in the leather box was the imitation Rienzi Vase. The circular glass top of the case gave some trouble. So hard and thick was it that I had to desist five times and conceal my tools, owing to the hourly visits of the inspector.

Poor Constable Smith began to groan toward six o'clock, and a second dose of medicine was necessary to keep him quiet for another hour or so.

I filed out with the other police in the morning, the Rienzi Vase inside my helmet. As to the sequel, it is brief. Of course the detectives tried their hands at the affair; but, pooh! I am too old a bird to leave 'clues'! It is only amateurs that do that!

My fee, and the conditions to be observed in paying it, I conveyed to the authorities privately.

They thought they had a 'clue' then, and delayed another week. They actually detained my unhappy agent, a most guileless and upright person, who knew positively nothing. Oh! it was too funny! But, realising that only by the vase being returned to its place could a scandal be avoided—they met me in the matter.