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The Treader of the Dust

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH

... The olden wizards knew him, and named him Quachil Uttaus. Seldom is he revealed: for he dwelleth beyond the outermost circle, in the dark limbo of unsphered time and space. Dreadful is the word that calleth him, though the word be unspoken save in thought: For Quachil Uttaus is the ultimate corruption; and the instant of his coming is like the passage of many ages; and neither flesh nor stone may abide his treading, but all things crumble beneath it atom from atom. And for this, some have called him The Treader of the Dust.

John Sebastian returned to his house, only to experience a ghastly horror

—*The Testaments of Carnamagos.*

It was after interminable debate and argument with himself, after many attempts to exorcise the dim, bodiless legion of his fears, that John Sebastian returned to the house he had left so hurriedly. He had been absent only for three days: but even this was an interruption without precedent in the life of reclusion and study to which he had given himself completely following his inheritance of the old mansion together with a generous income. At no time would he have defined fully the reason of his flight: nevertheless, flight had seemed imperative. There was some horrible urgency that had driven him forth; but now, since he had determined to go back, the urgency was resolved into a matter of nerves overwrought by too close and prolonged application to his books. He had fancied certain things: but the fancies were patently absurd and baseless.

Even if the phenomena that had perturbed him were not all imaginary, there must be some natural solution that had not occurred to his overheated mind at the time. The sudden yellowing of a newly purchased notebook, the crumbling of the sheets at their edges, were no doubt due to a latent imperfection of the paper; and the queer fading of his entries, which, almost overnight, had become faint as age-old writing, was clearly the result of cheap, faulty chemicals in the ink. The aspect of sheer, brittle, worm-hollowed antiquity which had manifested itself in certain articles of furniture, certain portions of the mansion, was no more than the sudden revealing of a covert disintegration that had gone on unnoticed by him in his sedulous application to dark but absorbing researches. And it was this same application, with its unbroken years of toil and confinement, which had brought about his premature aging; so that, looking into the mirror on the morn of his flight, he had been startled and shocked as if by the apparition of a withered mummy. As to the man-servant, Timmers—well, Timmers had been old ever since he could remember. It was only the exaggeration of sick nerves that had lately found in Timmers a decrepitude so extreme that it might fall, without the intermediacy of death, at any moment, into the corruption of the grave.

Indeed, he could explain all that had troubled him without reference to the wild, remote lore, the forgotten demonologies and systems of magic into which he had delved. Those passages in *The Testaments of Carnamagos*, over which he had pondered with weird dismay, were relevant only to the horrors evoked by mad sorcerers in bygone eons....

Sebastian, firm in such convictions, came back at sunset to his house. He did not tremble or falter as he crossed the pine-darkened grounds and ran quickly up the front steps. He fancied, but could not be sure, that there were fresh signs of dilapidation in the steps; and the house itself, as he approached it, had seemed to lean a little aslant, as if from some ruinous settling of the foundations: but this, he told himself, was an illusion wrought by the gathering twilight.

No lamps had been lit, but Sebastian was not unduly surprized by this, for he knew that Timmers, left to his own devices, was prone to dodder about in the gloom like a senescent owl, long after the proper time of lamp-lighting. Sebastian, on the other hand, had always been averse to darkness or even deep shadow; and of late the aversion had increased upon him. Invariably he turned on all the bulbs in the house as soon as the daylight began to fail. Now, muttering his irritation at Timmers' remissness, he pushed open the door and reached hurriedly for the hall switch.

Because, perhaps, of a nervous agitation which he would not own to himself, he fumbled for several moments without finding the knob. The hall was strangely dark, and a glimmering from the ashen sunset, sifted between tall pines into the doorway behind him, was seemingly powerless to penetrate beyond its threshold. He could see nothing; it was as if the night of dead ages had laired in that hallway; and his nostrils, while he stood groping, were assailed by a dry pungency as of ancient dust, an odor as of corpses and coffins long indistinguishable in powdery decay.

At last he found the switch; but the illumination that responded was somehow dim and insufficient, and he seemed to detect a shadowy flickering, as if the circuit were at fault. However, it reassured him to see that the house, to all appearance, was very much as he had left it. Perhaps, unconsciously, he had feared to find the oaken panels crumbling away in riddled rottenness, the carpet falling into moth-eaten tatters; had apprehended the breaking through of rotted boards beneath his tread.

Where, he wondered now, was Timmers? The aged factotum, in spite of his growing senility, had always been quick to appear; and even if he had not heard his master enter, the switching on of the lights would have signaled Sebastian's return to him. But, though Sebastian listened with painful intentness, there was no creaking of the familiar tottery footsteps. Silence hung everywhere like a funereal, unstimulated arras.

No doubt, Sebastian thought, there was some commonplace explanation. Timmers had gone to the near-by village, perhaps to restock the larder, or in hope of receiving a letter from his master; and Sebastian had missed him on the way home from the station. Or perhaps the old man had fallen ill and was now lying helpless in his room. Filled with this latter thought, he went straight to Timmers' bedchamber, which was on the ground floor, at the back of the mansion. It was empty, and the bed was neatly made and had obviously not been occupied since the night before. With a suspiration of relief that seemed to lift a horrid incubus from his bosom, he decided that his first conjecture had been correct.

Now, pending the return of Timmers, he nerved himself to another act of inspection, and went forthwith into his study. He would not admit to himself precisely what it was that he had feared to see; but at first glance, the room was unchanged, and all things were as they had been at the time of his flurried departure. The confused and high-piled litter of manuscripts, volumes, notebooks on his writing-table had seemingly lain untouched by anything but his own hand; and his bookshelves, with their bizarre and terrific array of authorities on diabolism, necromancy, goety, on all the ridiculed or outlawed sciences, were undisturbed and intact. On the old lectern or reading-stand which he used for his heavier tomes, *The Testaments of Carnamagos*, in its covers of shagreen with hasps of human bone, lay open at the very page which had frightened him so unreasonably with its eldritch intimations.

Then, as he stepped forward between the reading-stand and the table, he perceived for the first time the inexplicable *dustiness* of everything. Dust lay everywhere: a fine gray dust like a powder of dead atoms. It had covered his manuscripts with a deep film, it had settled thickly upon the chairs, the lamp-shades, the volumes; and the rich poppy-like reds and yellows of the oriental rugs were bedimmed by its accumulation. It was as if many desolate years had passed through the chamber since his own departure, and had shaken from their shroud-like garments the dust of all ruined things. The mystery of it chilled Sebastian: for he knew that the room had been clean-swept only three days previous; and Timmers would have dusted the place each morning with meticulous care during his absence.

Now the dust rose up in a light, swirling cloud about him, it filled his nostrils with the same dry odor, as of fantastically ancient dissolution, that had met him in the hall. At the same moment he grew aware of a cold, gusty draft that had somehow entered the room. He thought that one of the windows must have been left open, but a glance assured him that they were shut, with tightly drawn blinds; and the door was closed behind him. The draft was light as the sighing of a phantom, but wherever it passed, the fine, weightless powder soared aloft, filling the air and settling again with utmost slowness. Sebastian felt a weird alarm, as if a wind had blown him from chartless dimensions, or through some hidden rift of ruin; and simultaneously he was seized by a paroxysm of prolonged and violent coughing.

He could not locate the source of the draft. But, as he moved restlessly about, his eye was caught by a low long mound of the gray dust, which had heretofore been hidden from view by the table. It lay beside the chair in which he usually sat while writing. Near the heap was the feather-duster used by Timmers in his daily round of house-cleaning.

It seemed to Sebastian that the rigor of a great, lethal coldness had invaded all his being. He could not stir for several minutes, but stood peering down at the inexplicable mound. In the center of that mound he saw a vague depression, which might have been the mark of a very small footprint half erased by the gusts of air that had evidently taken much of the dust and scattered it about the chamber.

At last the power of motion returned to Sebastian. Without conscious recognition of the impulse that prompted him, he bent forward to pick up the feather-duster. But, even as his fingers touched it, the handle and the feathers crumbled into fine powder which, settling in a low pile, preserved vaguely the outlines of the original object!

A weakness came upon Sebastian, as if the burden of utter age and mortality had gathered crushingly on his shoulders between one instant and the next. There was a whirling of vertiginous shadows before his eyes in the lamplight, and he felt that he should swoon unless he sat down immediately. He put out his hand to reach the chair beside him—and the chair, at his touch, fell instantly into light, downward-sifting clouds of dust.

Afterward—how long afterward he could not tell—he found himself sitting in the high chair before the lectern on which *The Testaments of Carnamagos* lay open. Dimly he was surprized that the seat had not crumbled beneath him. Upon him, as once before, there was the urgency of swift, sudden flight from that accursed house: but it seemed that he had grown too old, too weary and feeble; and that nothing mattered greatly—not even the grisly doom which he apprehended.

Now, as he sat there in a state half terror, half stupor, his eyes were drawn to the wizard volume before him: the writings of that evil sage and seer, Carnamagos, which had been recovered a thousand years ago from some Græco-Bactrian tomb, and transcribed by an apostate monk in the original Greek, in the blood of an incubus-begotten monster. In that volume were the chronicles of great sorcerers of old, and the histories of demons earthly and ultra-cosmic, and the veritable spells by which the demons could be called up and controlled and dismissed. Sebastian, a profound student of such lore, had long believed that the book was a mere medieval legend; and he had been startled as well as gratified when he found this copy on the shelves of a dealer in old manuscripts and incunabula. It was said that only two copies had ever existed, and that the other had been destroyed by the Spanish Inquisition early in the Thirteenth Century.

The light flickered as if ominous wings had flown across it; and Sebastian's eyes blurred with a gathering rheum as he read again that sinister, fatal passage which had served to provoke shadowy fears:

Though Quachil Uttaus cometh but rarely, it hath been well attested that his advent is not always in response to the spoken rune and the drawn pentacle.... Few wizards, indeed, would call upon a spirit so baleful.... But let it be understood that he who readeth to himself, in the silence of his chamber, the formula given hereunder, must incur a grave risk if in his heart there abide openly or hidden the least desire of death and annihilation. For it may be that Quachil Uttaus will come to him, bringing that doom which toucheth the body to eternal dust, and maketh the soul as a vapor for evermore dissolved. And the advent of Quachil Uttaus is foreknowable by certain tokens: for in the person of the evocator, and even perchance in those about him, will appear the signs of sudden age; and his house, and those belongings which he hath touched, will assume the marks of untimely decay and antiquity....

Sebastian did not know that he was mumbling the sentences half aloud as he read them; that he was also mumbling the terrible incantation that followed.... His thoughts crawled as if through a chill and freezing medium. With a dull, ghastly certainty, he knew that Timmers had not gone to the village. He should have warned Timmers before leaving; he should have closed and locked *The Testaments of Carnamagos* ... for Timmers, in his way, was something of a scholar and was not without curiosity concerning the occult studies of his master. Timmers was well able to read the Greek of Carnamagos ... even that dire and soul-blasting formula to which Quachil Uttaus, demon of ultimate corruption, would respond from the outer void.... Too well Sebastian divined the origin of the gray dust, the reason of those mysterious crumbings....

Again he felt the impulse of flight: but his body was a dry dead incubus that refused to obey his volition. Anyway, he reflected, it was too late now, for the signs of doom had gathered about him and upon him.... Yet surely there had never been in his heart the least longing for death and destruction. He had wished only to pursue his delvings into the blacker mysteries that environed the mortal estate. And he had always been cautious, had never cared to meddle with magic circles and evocations of perilous presences. He had known that there were spirits of evil, spirits of wrath, perdition, annihilation: but never, of his own will, should he have summoned any of them from their night-bound abysses....

His lethargy and weakness seemed to increase: it was as if whole lustrums, whole decades of senescence had fallen upon him in the drawing of a breath. The thread of his thoughts was broken at intervals, and he recovered it with difficulty. His memories, even his fears, seemed to totter on the edge of some final forgetfulness. With dulled ears he heard a sound as of timbers breaking and falling somewhere in the house; with dimmed eyes like those of an ancient he saw the lights waver and go out beneath the swooping of a bat-black darkness.

It was as if the night of some crumbling catacomb had closed upon him. He felt at times the chill faint breathing of the draft that had troubled him before with its mystery; and again the dust rose up in his nostrils. Then he realized that the room was not wholly dark, for he could discern the dim outlines of the lectern before him. Surely no ray was admitted by the drawn window-blinds: yet somehow there was light. His eyes, lifting with enormous effort, saw for the first time that a rough, irregular gap had appeared in the room's outer wall, high up in the north corner. Through it, a single star shone into the chamber, cold and remote as the eye of a demon glaring across intercosmic gulfs.

Out of that star—or from the spaces beyond it—a beam of livid radiance, wan and deathly, was hurled like a spear upon Sebastian. Broad as a plank, unwavering, immovable, it seemed to transfix his very body and to form a bridge between himself and the worlds of unimagined darkness.

He was as one petrified by the gaze of the Gorgon. Then, through the aperture of ruin, there came something that glided stiffly and rapidly into the room toward him, along the beam. The wall seemed to crumble, the rift widened as it entered.

It was a figure no larger than a young child, but sere and shriveled as some millennial mummy. Its hairless head, its unfeatured face, borne on a neck of skeleton thinness, was lined with a thousand reticulated wrinkles. The body was like that of some monstrous, withered abortion that had never drawn breath. The pipy arms, ending in bony claws, were outthrust as if ankylosed in the posture of an eternal dreadful groping. The legs, with feet like those of a pigmy Death, were drawn tightly together as though confined by the swathings of the tomb; nor was there any movement of striding or pacing. Upright and rigid, the horror floated swiftly down the wan, deathly gray beam toward Sebastian.

Now it was close upon him, its head level with his brow and its feet opposite his bosom. For a fleeting moment he knew that the horror had touched him with its outflung hands, with its starkly floating feet. It seemed to merge within him, to become one with his being. He felt that his veins were choked with dust, that his brain was crumbling cell by cell. Then he was no longer John Sebastian, but a universe of dead stars and worlds that fell eddying into darkness before the tremendous blowing of some ultrastellar wind....

The thing that immemorial wizards had named Quachil Uttaus was gone; and night and starlight had returned to that ruinous chamber. But nowhere was there any shadow of John Sebastian: only a low mound of dust on the floor beside the lectern, bearing a vague depression like the imprint of a small foot ... or of two feet that were pressed closely together.

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Volume 26 AUGUST, 1935 Number 2

The Treader of the Dust Clark Ashton Smith 241

[The end of *The Treader of the Dust* by Clark Ashton Smith]