



ILLUSTRATION BY WILLIAM MCAUSLAND

INTERRED WITH THE WORM

By **SCOTT J. COUTURIER**

NEEED I introduce myself? I suppose so, in this benighted age. Or rather Enlightened, as the proselytes insist. Yet, would my name and deeds have been lost to history's abyss were aught as it should be? I think not.

My name is Hermides Senph. Tomb-robber of old, now a sad lurker in shadows fast-waning before the zealotry of the Lords of the White Brand. But — you have found me, in my shadows, come to me with questions only I can answer. This amulet you speak of; I see such avarice in your gaze. Well I reckon the look from my own eyes, reflected in the funerary breastplates of emperor-mages or gleaming in tarnished mirrors set up to ward the inhumed. The Amulet of Zoz — there is a tale to it, if you would listen. Since I speak at your behest I shan't have to entice you with ale to hear my ramblings, as is ever the case.

I found myself commissioned, alongside thirteen stalwart Soldiers of the Court, to retrieve the Amulet of Zoz from a remote desert tomb, all in a former age even more remote. A local warlord called Hedulus the Ruddy, who fashioned himself a sort of king, was my employer. He reigned from a rude mud-brick palace, an ever-expanding harem of slaves at his beck, treasury overflowing with the spoils of rapine — truly, all the things necessary to make a king. These Soldiers of the Court, capable in their way, were of rude countenance and habits, though I welcomed them on my quest. A tomb-robber can't be too finicky when it comes to choosing his companions; suffice to say I'd worked with far worse in my time.

This amulet, as you may or may not know, was reputed to possess the power of rendering the wearer impervious to all harm. Arrows, sword thrusts, even dark magic: the old texts waxed voluminous in their praises of its efficacy. Hedulus, crude and foolish brute that he was, desired the thing for himself so he could lead his armies to the fray, rather than issuing commands from his pleasure-chambers. Some of his men, as it happens, were beginning to question the stalwartness of a warlord that never rode into battle. It would be a secret thing, his possession of the amulet, allowing him to appear brave in the grip of perils only faced by those fools who followed him. I must confess, I appreciated his perverse sense of cowardice; such twistings of character kept fellows like myself in a job. The thirteen, needless to say, were unaware of the particulars of their mission beyond ferrying me safely to the tomb, then retrieving me once the signal was given.

Everything happened in no small haste. A swift journey by night, riding on camel back, the twin moons painting the desert a blent shade of luminous amber. The amulet, so it happened, had been scried out for Hedulus by a seer of the Desolate Path,

gleaned from a copious gift of leper's entrails. It belonged to a low-caste magus named Reva Phi, who kept his ownership a fast secret. According to Hedulus' scouts, the magus, getting on in years, had recently forgotten to don the amulet before going to his well, dying from a serpent's bite to the heel. Already his body had been embalmed and wrapped by the local peoples, who revered him as something of a Holy Man. The amulet, accordingly, had been placed around his neck out of respect, the local peoples having no knowledge of its power.

The plan — which went according to itself, at least at first — dictated that I imbibe a tincture designed to imitate the state of death. This I did, once we reached an oasis near the necropolis where Reva Phi would be interred. Such practices no doubt seem peculiar, perhaps even blasphemous, to the righteous of this depressing age, when immolation is the commonest funerary rite. These people revered their ancestors, interring them with great pomp and wailings in a subterranean vault untold leagues in breadth. The mortal remains of ten-thousand cycles, stored up moldering in an eternal nitre-stinking night — ah, almost I can inhale and smell that delicious putridness anew! Regional customs prescribed preserving the dead until some hundred were massed, only then launching a torchlit pilgrimage to that chasm of death, depositing all the remains in one ecstatic ceremony.

I took the tincture, laid back and allowed myself to be swathed in the funerary bindings while still aware and breathing. Such a thing, of course, would be unthinkable for an amateur in my trade, but to me the enfolding of grave-cloth had become as familiar and comfortable as a caterpillar weaving itself into a cocoon. I knew I would be reborn in the deeps below, life springing aware in the very pit of death's domain. Oh! Even the recounting thrills me. I seem to have developed a flush.

Hmm. Do I see you tapping your fingers in impatience? Such a youthful trait. Come now. You sought me out — and would I leapt right to telling of the amulet and its powers, perhaps even its current whereabouts. I counsel you to heed an old man's rambling, to endure and bide, lest I tire of my efforts to enlighten you.

Now where was I? Ah yes, in the tomb! I awoke in a reeking cedar coffin, my senses returning by gradual degrees as I sucked at air through the funerary bindings. At length, I felt able to stir my limbs and tear through the shroud, then proceeding to the technicality of freeing myself from the coffin. A woman of the local tribes had dressed my body for burial, risking the wrath of her ancestors for a few measly copper; funny, how sacrilege can be bought for almost any price.

Finally, I cut through the lid and extricated myself, sat up and lit a nitrous-torch, throwing a light into darkness both implacable and familiar. Immediately I saw the massive sealing-stone, put in place at ceremony's end, graven with wards to keep the dead at rest and appeased. Stacked around me lay a hundred further coffins, all sealed and dumped about the cavernous room with a surprising lack of ceremony. I frowned at this, feeling my first twinge of unease — and ever must a tomb-robber trust to their instincts. Still, I was not to be deterred, but set about prying open the coffins and rifling through their contents one-by-one. A morbid task, even for one of my mettle, for here were children struck down by fever or accident or sword-blade, women who had died in childbirth clutching the grave-swaddled forms of infants — always did that people slay the child if the mother died in birth, fearing it to be a demon. And youths and old men, and all the panoply of humanity, there mounded together in one heaping pile of disarranged coffins.

My task took some hours. In that time, I felt occasional breaths of cold, moist air from further on in the catacombs, prickling at my nape: this surprised me, as Hedulus' scouts described the place as possessing a singular dryness. Too, I could find no evidence of the untold generations of mummified corpses I had anticipated as companions to my labor. The tunnel leading down into the necropolis shone smooth and clean in my torchlight, almost as if polished; at turns, a low moaning or gurgling sound came out of that wet darkness, a sloshing and pulsing sound, as abhorrent to my ears as it was unknown. Yet, it seemed to draw no nearer, but to pulse out there in the black, a hungry and malign awareness I prayed would remain senescent for the length of my errand.

At last, upon opening and rifling through the seventieth coffin, I found Reva Phi's venom-distorted body. Not even the effects of embalming had served to smooth the rictus of agony from his features, his eyes protruding in sickly bulges beneath two gold coins laid over them. These I left undisturbed; best if one errs on the side of caution when undertaking such grim errands, not allowing greed to overcome common sense. The dead are quite content to stay dead — unless they feel they are being disrespected. At any rate, that's how it was in the age I speak of.

Slitting open the shroud, I found what I sought strung about the corpse's neck. The Amulet of Zoz, gleaming in the greenish glow of my nitrous-torch, a profound ruby set about with fretting of orichalc. I drew it out with a sense of reverence, careful first to don a pair of wyvern-skin gloves to protect me from any baneful eldritch emanation. The corpse, I daresay, did begin to stir, coins slipping from eyes that, for one terrible moment, seemed to stare up at me with a conscious wrath. Then they dimmed and withered inwards, the whole body going slack, collapsing with a rustle as of shifting sand.

I eased back from the magician's corpse and cradled my find, holding it up to glimmer and gleam by the light of my torch. Even then did I hear, from behind in the rank darkness, a sloshing and groaning that drew closer, with a rapidity that made me drop my find to the cold stone. It landed with a damning *clank!*

The thing bore down on me, pools of luminous slime oozing from the far aperture announcing its imminence. Staggering back in awe and horror, I snuffed my torch and scrambled over to the sealing-block, knocking frantically but in set intervals at the engraved stone. My companions of the Guard, so stalwart-seeming, were meant to hear my poundings and let me out. However, no one answered my scrablings and cries; it may be they took advantage of a chance to flee a tyrant's service, as I would have done in their place. Regardless, I cannot think too kindly on them, knowing they abandoned me to living interment without a thought or care.

The thing drew closer still, and I turned in the darkness with grit teeth, knowing I must face the peril with my own meager wits and main. At that, I cursed myself for dropping the amulet, insofar as it supposedly protected the wearer from harm. Yet would I have hesitated to put it on save at utmost need, not knowing anything of its effects beyond the anecdotal; that I touched it with protective gloves should say as much.

What then emerged from the dark is blazoned on my memory. Yea, though I have raided ten-thousand charnel houses, slept side-by-side with the dead, even seeing them stir to vengeful animacy at my ministrations; though baneful spirits and bleak gods have I thwarted aplenty, this one thing I remember with perfect vividness. Even as I flushed with eager nostalgia to recall the grave's bouquet, so I now tremble with chill to recount what I witnessed, what befell.

From that cavernous blackness came the groping, slime-exuding mass of a great white Worm. I beheld it by light of its own luminescence, waves of flourescing slime cascading from its gluttonous segments to pave the chamber floor in a sticky seepage. I describe it as a worm, so perhaps you think it moved slow or ponderously, even as an earthworm does; but no. Fast as a lightning-strike it set about devouring the amassed coffins and their contents, a toothless maw gaping open near the head (if, indeed, it possessed such a thing) into which the dead flowed on a river of lubricating slime. Horrible suckling and slurping sounds it made as it supped to the last corpse on that overbountiful offering, my eyes fixed and unblinking all the while, riveted by the throbbing white coils of its body as it swallowed each casket, the bulges proceeding down its interminable length into depthless darkness beyond.

I see, now, I have something of your earnest attention. Forgotten all about the amulet, mayhap? Well, so had I. Lost in the ghoulish spectacle before me, all thought of my mission fled my mind, and I made no effort to locate the amulet. Only when I saw it glinting in the light of that phosphorescent slime, borne on a tide of the stuff *into* that great Worm's craw, did I remember aught of my errand, cursing myself silently for having lost it in so catastrophic a way. I knew now I must confront the Worm if I would succeed in my duty and collect my pay; furthermore, the thing's hunger showed no signs of appeasement, which led me to believe once the corpses were consumed it would come for my sweeter, more vital meat. Trembling at the task suddenly before me, I snicked my shortsword from the sheath at my thigh as I watched the Worm gorge itself, though never to satiety. 'Bottomless as a ghou's gullet,' so the saying once went. I can assure you the bottom fell out of my stomach in that moment.