

The Thing in the Crypt

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# 1. Red Eyes

For two days the wolves had trailed him through the woods, and now they were closing in again. Looking back over his shoulder, the boy caught glimpses of them: shaggy, hulking shapes of shadowy gray, loping amongst the black tree trunks, with eyes that burned like red coals in the gathering murk. This time, he knew, he could not fight them off as he had done before.

He could not see very far, because all around him rose, like the silent soldiers of some bewitched army, the trunks of millions of black spruces. Snow clung in dim, white patches to the northern slopes of the hills, but the gurgle of thousands of rills from melting snow and ice presaged the coming of spring. This was a dark, silent, gloomy world even in high summer; and now, as the dim light from the overcast faded with the approach of dusk, it seemed more somber than ever.

The stripling ran on, up the heavily wooded slope, as he had run for the two days since he had fought his way out of the Hyperborean slave pen. Although a purebred Cimmerian, he had been one of a band of raiding AEsir, harrying the borders of the Hyperboreans. The gaunt, blond warriors of that grim land had trapped and smashed the raiding party; and the boy Conan, for the first time in his life, had tasted the bitterness of the chains and the lash that were the normal lot of the slave.

He had not, however, long remained in slavery. Working at night while others slept, he had ground away at one link of his chain until it was weak enough for him to snap. Then, during a heavy rainstorm, he had burst loose. Whirling a four-foot length of heavy, broken chain, he had slain his overseer and a soldier who had sprung to block his way, and vanished into the downpour. The rain that hid him from sight also baffled the hounds of the search party sent after him.

Although free for the moment, the youth had found himself with half the breadth of a hostile kingdom between him and his native Cimmeria. So he had fled south into the wild, mountainous country that separated the southern marches of Hyperborea from the fertile plains of Brythunia and the Turanian steppes. Somewhere to the south, he had heard, lay the fabulous kingdom of Zamora —Zamora with its dark-haired women and towers of spider-haunted mystery. There stood famous cities: the capital, Shadizar, called the City of Wickedness; the thief-city of Arenjun; and Yezud, the city of the spider god.

The year before, Conan had had his first taste of the luxuries of civilization when, as one of the blood-mad horde of Cimmerian clansmen that had poured over the walls of Venarium, he had taken part in the sack of that Aquilonian outpost. The taste had whetted his appetite for more. He had no clear ambition or program of action; nothing but vague dreams of desperate adventures in the rich lands of the South. Visions of glittering gold and jewels, unlimited food and drink, and the hot embraces of beautiful women of noble birth, as his prizes of valor, flitted through his naive young mind. In the South, he thought, his hulking size and strength should somehow easily bring him fame and fortune among the city-bred weaklings. So he headed south, to seek his fate with no more equipment than a tattered, threadbare tunic and a length of chain.

And then the wolves had caught his scent. Ordinarily, an active man had little to fear from wolves. But this was the end of winter; the wolves, starving after a bad season, were ready for any desperate chance.

The first time they had caught up with him, he had wielded the chain with such fury that he left one gray wolf writhing and howling in the snow with a broken back, and another dead with a smashed skull. Scarlet gore spattered the melting snow. The famished pack had slunk away from this fierce-eyed lad with the terrible whirling chain, to feast upon their own dead brethren instead, and young Conan had fled southward.

But, ere long, they were again upon his track.

Yesterday, at sunset, they had caught up with him at a frozen river on the borders of Brythunia. He had fought them on the slippery ice, swinging the bloody chain like a flail, until the boldest wolf had seized the iron links between grim jaws, tearing the chain from his numb grasp. Then the fury of the battle and the hurtling weight of the pack had broken the rotten ice beneath them. Conan found himself gasping and choking in the icy flood. Several wolves had fallen in with him—he had a brief impression of a wolf, half immersed, scrabbling frantically with its forepaws at the edge of the ice—but how many had succeeded in scrambling out, and how many had been swept under the ice by the swift current, he never learned.

Teeth chattering, he hauled himself out on the ice on the farther side, leaving the howling pack behind. All night he had fled south through the wooded hills, half-naked and half-frozen, and all this day. Now they had caught up with him again.

The cold mountain air burned in his straining lungs, until every breath was like inhaling the blast from some hellish furnace. Devoid of feeling, his leaden legs moved like pistons. With each stride, his sandaled feet sank into the water-soaked earth and came out again with sucking sounds.

He knew that, bare-handed, he stood little chance against a dozen shaggy man-killers. Yet he trotted on without pausing. His grim Cimmerian heritage would not let him give up, even in the face of certain death.

Snow was falling again—big, wet flakes that struck with a faint but audible hiss and spotted the wet, black earth and the towering black spruces with a myriad dots of white. Here and there, great boulders shouldered out of the needle-carpeted earth; the land was growing ever more rocky and mountainous. And herein, thought Conan, might lie his one chance for life. He could take a stand with his back against a rock and fight the wolves off as they came at him. It was a slim chance—he well knew the steel-trap quickness of those lean, wiry, hundred-pound bodies—but better than none.

The woods thinned out as the slope grew steeper. Conan loped toward a huge mass of rocks that jutted from the hillside, like the entrance to a buried castle. As he did so, the wolves broke from the edge of the thick woods and raced after him, howling like the scarlet demons of Hell as they track and pull down a doomed soul.

# 2. The Door in the Rock

Through the white blur of whirling snow, the boy saw a yawning blackness between two mighty planes of rock and flung himself toward it. The wolves were upon his heels—he thought he could feel their hot, reeking breath upon his bare legs—when he hurled himself into the black cleft that gaped before him. He squeezed through the opening just as the foremost wolf sprang at him. Drooling jaws snapped on empty air; Conan was safe.

But for how long?

Stooping, Conan fumbled about in the dark, pawing the rough stone floor as he sought for any loose object with which to fight off the howling horde. He could hear them padding about in the fresh snow outside, their claws scraping on stone. Like himself, they breathed in quick pants. They snuffled and whined, hungry for blood. But not one came through the doorway, a dim, gray slit against the blackness. And that was strange.

Conan found himself in a narrow chamber in the rock, utterly black save for the feeble twilight that came through the cleft. The uneven floor of the cell was strewn with litter blown in by centuries of wind or carried in by birds and beasts: dead leaves, spruce needles, twigs, a few scattered bones, pebbles, and chips of rock. There was nothing in all this trash that he could use for a weapon.

Stretching to his full height—already inches over six feet—the boy began exploring the wall with outstretched hand. Soon he came upon another door. As he groped his way through this portal into pitch-blackness, his questing fingers told him that here were chisel marks on the stone, forming cryptic glyphs in some unknown writing.

Unknown, at least, to the, untutored boy from the barbarous northlands, who could neither read nor write and who scorned such civilized skills as effeminate.

He had to stoop double to wedge himself through the inner door, but beyond it he could once more stand erect. He paused, listening warily.

Although the silence was absolute, some sense seemed to warn him that he was not alone in the chamber. It was nothing he could see, hear, or smell, but a sense of presence, different from any of these.

His sensitive, forest-trained ears, listening for echoes, told him that this inner chamber was much larger than the outer one. The place smelt of ancient dust and bats' droppings. His shuffling feet encountered things scattered about the floor. While he could not see these objects, they did not feel like the forest litter that carpeted the antechamber.

They felt more like man-made things.

As he took a quick step along the wall, he stumbled over one such object in the dark. As he fell, the thing splintered with a crash beneath his weight. A snag of broken wood scraped his shin, adding one more scratch to those of the spruce boughs and the wolves' claws.

Cursing, he recovered himself and felt in the dark for the thing he had demolished. It was a chair, the wood of which had rotted so that it easily broke beneath his weight.

He continued his explorations more cautiously. His groping hands met another, larger object, which he presently recognized as the body of a chariot. The wheels had collapsed with the rotting of their spokes, so that the body lay on the floor amid the fragments of spokes and pieces of the rims.

Conan's questing hands came upon something cold and metallic. His sense of touch told him that this was probably a rusty iron fitting from the chariot. This gave him an idea. Turning, he groped his way back to the inner portal, which he could barely discern against the all-pervading blackness. From the floor of the antechamber he gathered a fistful of tinder and several stone chips. Back in the inner chamber, he made a pile of the tinder and tried the stones on the iron. After several failures, he found a stone that emitted a bright flash of sparks when struck against the iron.

Soon he had a small, smoky fire sputtering, which he fed with the broken rungs of the chair and the fragments of the chariot wheels. Now he could relax, rest from his terrible cross-country run, and warm his numbed limbs. The briskly burning blaze would deter the wolves, which still prowled about the outer entrance, reluctant to pursue him into the darkness of the cave but also unwilling to give up their quarry.

The fire sent a warm, yellow light dancing across the walls of roughly dressed stone. Conan gazed about him. The room was square and even larger than his first impressions had told him. The high ceiling was lost in thick shadows and clotted with cobwebs. Several other chairs were set against the walls, together with a couple of chests that had burst open to show their contents of clothing and weapons. The great stone room smelt of death—of ancient things long unburied.

And then the hair lifted from the nape of his neck, and the boy felt his skin roughen with a supernatural thrill. For there, enthroned on a great, stone chair at the further end of the chamber, sat the huge figure of a naked man, with a naked sword across his knees and a cavernous skull-face staring at him through the flickering firelight.

Almost as soon as he sighted the naked giant, Conan knew he was dead—long ages dead. The corpse's limbs were as brown and withered as dry sticks. The flesh on its huge torso had dried, shrunk, and split until it clung in tatters to naked ribs.

This knowledge, however, did not calm the youth's sudden chill of terror. Fearless beyond his years in war, willing to stand against man or brute beast in battle, the boy feared neither pain, nor death, nor mortal foes. But he was a barbarian from the northern hills of backward Cimmeria. Like all barbarians, he dreaded the supernatural terrors of the grave and the dark, with all its dreads and demons and the monstrous, shambling things of Old Night and Chaos, with which primitive folk people the darkness beyond the circle of their campfire.

Much rather would Conan have faced even the hungry wolves than remain here with the dead thing glaring down at him from its rocky throne, while the wavering firelight painted life and animation into the withered skull-face and moved the shadows in its sunken sockets like dark, burning eyes.

# 3. The Thing on the Throne

Although his blood ran chill and his nape hairs prickled, the boy fiercely took hold of himself. Bidding his night-fears be damned, he strode stiff-legged across the vault for a closer look at the long-dead thing.

The throne was a square boulder of glassy, black stone, roughly hollowed into the likeness of a chair on a foot-high dais. The naked man had either died while sitting in it or had been placed upon it in a sitting position after his death. Whatever garments he had worn had long since mouldered away to fragments. Bronze buckles and scraps of leather from his harness still lay about his feet. A necklace of unshaped nuggets of gold hung about his neck; uncut gems winked from golden rings on his claw-like hands, which still clasped the arms of the throne. A horned helm of bronze, now covered with a green, waxy coating of verdegris, crowned the pate above the withered, brown horror of the face.

With iron nerve, Conan forced himself to peer into those time-eaten features. The eyes had sunken in, leaving two black pits. Skin had peeled back from dried lips, letting the yellow fangs grin in a mirthless leer.

Who had he been, this dead thing? A warrior of ancient times—some great chief, feared in life and still enthroned in death? None could say. A hundred races had roved and ruled these mountainous borderlands since Atlantis sank beneath the emerald waves of the Western Ocean, eight thousand years before. From the horned helm, the cadaver might have been a chief of the primal Vanir or AEsir, or the primitive king of some forgotten Hyborian tribe, long since vanished into the shadows of time and buried under the dust of ages.

Then Conan's gaze dropped to the great sword that lay across the corpse's bony thighs. It was a terrific weapon: a broadsword with a blade well over a yard in length. It was made of blued iron—not copper or bronze, as might have been expected from its obvious age. It might have been one of the first iron weapons borne by the hand of man; the legends of Conan's people remembered the days when men hewed and thrust with ruddy bronze, and the fabrication of iron was unknown. Many battles had this sword seen in the dim past, for its broad blade, although still keen, was notched in a score of places where, clanging, it had met other blades of sword and ax in the slash and parry of the melee. Stained with age and spotted with rust, it was still a weapon to be feared.

The boy felt his pulses pound. The blood of one born to war seethed within him. Crom, what a sword! With a blade like that, he could more than hold his own against the starving wolves that padded, whined, and waited without. As he reached for the hilt with eager hand, he failed to see the warning flicker that moved within those shadowed eye sockets in the skull-head of the ancient warrior.

Conan hefted the blade. It seemed as heavy as lead—a sword of the Elder Ages. Perhaps some fabled hero-king of old had borne it—some legendary demigod like Kull of Atlantis, king of Valusia in the ages before Atlantis foundered beneath the restless sea…

The boy swung the sword, feeling his thews swell with power and his heart beat faster with pride of possession. Gods, what a sword! With such a blade, no destiny was too high for a warrior to aspire to! With a sword such as this, even a half-naked young barbarian from the raw Cimmerian wilderness might hack his way across the world and wade through rivers of gore to a place among the high kings of earth!

He stood back from the throne of stone, feinting and cutting the air with the blade, getting the feel of the age-worn hilt against his hard palm. The keen old sword whistled through the smoky air, and the flickering light of the fire glanced in sparkling rays from the planes of the blade to the rough stone walls, whipping along the sides of the chamber like little, golden meteors. With this mighty brand in his grasp, he could face not only the hungry wolves outside but a world of warriors as well.

The boy expanded his chest and boomed out the savage war cry of his folk. The echoes of that cry thunderously reverberated about the chamber, disturbing ancient shadows and old dust. Conan never paused to think that such a challenge, in such a place, might rouse things other than shadows and dust—things that by all rights should have slumbered without interruption through all future eons.

He stopped, frozen in mid-stride, as a sound—an indescribable, dry creaking—came from the throne side of the crypt. Wheeling, he saw… and felt the hair lift from his scalp and the blood turn to ice in his veins. All his superstitious terrors and primal night-fears rose howling, to fill his mind with shadows of madness and horror. For the dead thing lived.

# 4. When Dead Men Walk

Slowly, jerkily, the cadaver rose from its great stone chair and glared at him from its black pits, whence now living eyes seemed to blaze forth with a coldly malignant stare. Somehow—by what primeval necromancy the boy Conan could not guess—life still animated the withered mummy of the long-dead chief. Grinning jaws moved open and shut in a fearful pantomime of speech. But the only sound was the creaking that Conan had heard, as if the shriveled remains of muscles and tendons rubbed dryly together. To Conan, this silent imitation of speech was more terrible than the fact that the dead man lived and moved.

Creaking, the mummy stepped down from the dais of its ancient throne and swiveled its skull in Conan's direction. As its eyeless gaze fixed itself on the sword in Conan's hand, lurid witch fires burned within the hollow sockets. Stalking clumsily across the chamber, the mummy advanced upon Conan like a shape of nameless horror from the nightmares of a mad fiend. It extended its bony claws to snatch the sword from Conan's strong young hands.

Numb with superstitious terror, Conan retreated step by step. The firelight painted the mummy's black, monstrous shadow on the wall behind it. The shadow rippled over the rough stone. Save for the crackle of the flames as they bit into the pieces of ancient furniture with which Conan had fed the fire, the rustle and creak of the cadaver's leathery muscles as they propelled it step by faltering step across the crypt, and the panting breath of the youth as he struggled for air in the grip of terror—save for these sounds, the tomb was silent.

Now the dead thing had Conan backed against a wall. One brown claw stretched jerkily out. The boy's reaction was automatic; instinctively, he struck out. The blade whistled and smote the outstretched arm, which cracked like a broken stick. Still clutching at empty air, the severed hand fell with a dry clack to the floor; no blood spurted from the dry stump of the forearm.

The terrible wound, which would have stopped any living warrior, did not even slow the walking corpse. It merely withdrew the stump of the maimed arm and extended the other.

Wildly, Conan burst from the wall, swinging his blade in great, smashing strokes. One blow caught the mummy in the side. Ribs snapped like twigs under the impact, and the cadaver was hurled off its feet with a clatter. Conan stood panting in the center of the room clutching the worn hilt in a sweaty palm. With widened eyes he watched as slowly, creakily, the mummy dragged itself to its feet again and began mechanically shuffling toward him, its remaining claw extended.

# 5. Duel With the Dead

Around and around they went, circling slowly. Conan swung lustily but retreated step by step before the unstoppable advance of the dead thing that came on and on.

A blow at its remaining arm missed as the mummy jerked the member out of the path of the sword; the impetus swung Conan half around and, before he could recover, it was almost upon him. Its claw-hand snatched at him, caught a fold of his tunic, and ripped the rotten cloth from his body, leaving him naked except for sandals and loincloth.

Conan danced back and swung at the monster's head. The mummy ducked, and again Conan had to scramble to keep out of its grip. At last he caught it a terrific blow on the side of the head, shearing off one horn of the helm. Another blow sent the helmet itself clanging into a corner. Another bit into the dry, brown skull. The blade stuck for an instant—an instant that almost undid the boy, whose skin was scraped by ancient black nails as he frantically tugged his weapon loose.

The sword caught the mummy in the ribs again, lodged for a nearly fatal second in the spine, and then was jerked loose once more. Nothing, it seemed, could stop it. Dead, it could not be hurt. Always it staggered and shuffled toward him, untiring and unfaltering, even though its body bore wounds that would have laid a dozen stout warriors moaning in the dirt.

How can you kill a thing that is already dead? The question echoed madly in Conan's brain. It went round and round until he thought he would go mad with the repetition of it. His lungs labored; his heart pounded as if it were about to burst. Slash and strike as he would, nothing could even slow the dead thing that shuffled after him.

Now he struck with greater cunning. Reasoning that if it could not walk it could not pursue him, he drove a fierce, back-handed slash against the mummy's knee. A bone cracked, and the mummy collapsed, groveling in the dust of the cavern floor. But still the unnatural life burned within the mummy's withered breast. It staggered to its feet again and lurched after the boy, dragging its crippled leg behind it.

Again Conan struck, and the dead thing's lower face was shorn away; the jawbone went rattling off into the shadows. But the cadaver never stopped. With its lower face a mere expanse of broken white bone beneath the uncanny glow in its eye sockets, it still shambled after its antagonist in tireless, mechanical pursuit. Conan began to wish he had stayed outside with the wolves rather than sought shelter in this cursed crypt, where things that should have died a thousand years ago still stalked and slew.

Then something caught his ankle. Off balance, he fell full-length to the rough stone floor, kicking wildly to free his leg from that bony grip. He stared down and felt his blood freeze when he saw the severed hand of the corpse clutching his foot. Its bony claws bit into his flesh.

Then a grisly shape of nightmare horror and lunacy loomed over him. The broken, mangled face of the corpse leered down into his, and one claw-hand darted towards his throat.

Conan reacted by instinct. With all his might, he brought both sandaled feet up against the shrunken belly of the dead thing stooping over him.

Hurled into the air, it fell with a crash behind him, right in the fire.

Then Conan snatched at the severed hand, which still gripped his ankle.

He tore it loose, rolled to his feet, and hurled the member into the fire after the rest of the mummy. He stopped to snatch up his sword and whirled back toward the fire—to find the battle over.

Desiccated by the passage of countless centuries, the mummy burned with the fury of dry brushwood. The unnatural life within it still flickered as it struggled erect, while flames ran up its withered form, leaping from limb to limb and converting it into a living torch. It had almost clambered out of the fire when its crippled leg gave way, and it collapsed in a mass of roaring flame. One blazing arm dropped off like a twitching stick. The skull rolled through the coals. Within minutes the mummy was utterly consumed, but for a few glowing coals of blackened bone.

# 6. The Sword of Conan

Conan let out his breath with a long sigh and breathed deeply once again. The tension drained out of him, leaving him weary in every limb.

He wiped the cold sweat of terror from his face and combed back the tangle of his black hair with his fingers. The dead warrior's mummy was at last truly dead, and the great sword was his. He hefted it again, relishing its weight and power.

For an instant he thought of spending the night in the tomb. He was deathly tired. Outside, the wolves and the cold waited to bring him down, and not even his wilderness-bred sense of direction could keep him on his chosen course on a starless night in a strange land.

But then revulsion seized him. The smoke-filled chamber stank, now, not only of the dust of ages but also of the burning of long-dead human flesh—a strange odor, like nothing Conan's keen nostrils had ever detected before, and altogether revolting. The empty throne seemed to leer at him. That sense of presence that had struck him when he first entered the inner chamber still lingered in his mind. His scalp crawled and his skin prickled when he thought of sleeping in this haunted chamber.

Besides, with his new sword, he was filled with confidence. His chest expanded, and he swung the blade in whistling circles.

Moments later, wrapped in an old fur cloak from one of the chests and holding a torch in one hand and the sword in the other, he emerged from the cave. There was no sign of the wolves. A glance upward showed that the sky was clearing. Conan studied the stars that glimmered between patches of cloud, then once more set his footsteps to southward.