



# CARRION CRYPT

By RICHARD CASEY

It was a crypt where, they said, the dead lay uneasy.  
But some men are unafraid of death—until they face it.

**I**T ISN'T a pleasant task to record the story of Jason Ford. Ford was one of those strange men who spend their lives snooping into the strange corners of the world.

Jason Ford was a member of the Explorers' Club, and that's the one thing we had in common. We were, if I'm allowed to stretch the point a bit, both explorers. However, I confine my wandering to the safer places of the world. I like Mexico, and the deep valleys of Alaska. Jason Ford didn't fit into the "local" class.

I recall expressing admiration for Ford's courage in making several trips into the forbidden territory of Tibet.

"To my way of thinking," I said one night as we sat in the lounge, "Tibet is a part of the world that I wouldn't mind flying over, but it would be like poison to get dropped

into."

Jason Ford downed his shot of scotch, which I had learned he could drink in vast quantities without any visible effect. His face, very tanned from a recent trip to Africa, suddenly showed tired, worried lines. He leaned back in the well worn leather chair and sighed.

"Tibet once held a great attraction for me," he confessed. "There are times when I feel that I'd like to go back. I'm afraid all the doors are locked and barred against my return."

I was amazed.

"But the Barnes-Ferris caravan came out only two months ago. Surely . . .?"

He nodded.

"I said that *I* was forbidden to enter Tibet. There are others who come and go with

no trouble.”

I was on the scent of a good story. I ordered another bottle of scotch from the bar, and bit by bit, I got the story from Ford. He didn't enjoy telling it, but I knew it was one of those things that had to be told. It had been gnawing away inside of him until it had become a raw sore.

“I WAS at Tashi-Lunpo that year,” Jason Ford said. “I had been invited to witness the Tibetan New Year, and would gain a personal interview with the highest of all high, the Grand Lama.”

I nodded.

“The man who is God in human body. The supreme being.”

Jason Ford's eyes were suddenly alive with fire. It was as though in these magic moments, he had been bodily transported back to Tibet.

“Heavenly Buddha of Measureless Light,” he almost whispered. “Although I *did* witness the celebration of the New Year, and spoke to the Grand Lama many times, these incidents do not have any direct bearing upon my story.

“The Grand Lama and I became fast friends. I believe that everyone who saw him, worshiped him for his wonderful goodness.”

I was amazed at his sincerity. I was amazed at his sincerity. I had always imagined Jason Ford as a hard-headed, hard hitting realist.

“You weren't converted to the faith?”

As I spoke, I knew that I was making a mistake. It was none of my business. I know that my own faith has certain dogmas which it cannot escape. Who was I to judge what was right and wrong?

“Every man to his faith,” Jason admitted. “One must live in Tibet to understand. The vastness of it. The cold, icy grandeur of it. One must renounce the world

and learn the ageless secrets of Tibet. One must forget all else.”

I didn't interrupt him, and he went on speaking in a dreamy voice.

“I decided to stay in Tibet. I adopted the cloak and peaked cap of the monks. I resigned myself to the lonely life of the monastery.”

He smiled bitterly. I swear that he was reliving those days in wind-swept Tibet. Jason Ford had returned in spirit to the roof of the world, and could once more hear the temple drums and the steady clicking of the prayer wheels.

“I was sure of myself. I was very sure. *Om-mani-padme-hum.*”

The last phrase was a soft sign. He smiled at me.

“*Salvation is found only in true faith,*” he said.

His hands were clenched.

“Once I went to the Temple of Linga. I should never have gone there. I entered the long, dark hall, and still new at the monastery, I was frightened and awed by the place. Sacrificial gifts of corn and brass bowls of water were placed on the altar. Rats scurried about, interrupted from their meal.”

His facial muscles grew rigid.

“Deep under the spell of the place, I fully expected to see the horrible features of Yama, god of the infernal regions, leaning over me. I watched the sacred dog, a mongrel of the filthiest sort, as he paced back and forth outside the grotto of Sande-puk.

“It was a place of the dead, and I was about to leave it hurriedly when a procession of monks came slowly up the hill from the monastery. I wasn't supposed to be here alone. Frightened, I hid in the darkness and they entered the temple.

“They went directly to the grotto and two of them entered and placed a threadbare rug on the stone floor. One of their members

entered the grotto and kneeled there alone. It was then that I received the shock. I'll never quite forget it. They all set to work calmly to seal the grotto. They closed every crack through which light might seep. They left only a small, dirty gutter at the bottom. When the task was finished, they prayed, clicked their little prayer wheels and left that monk alone, sealed in a crypt, without light or warmth."

**H**E PASSED his hand over his eyes. Ford was stirred deeply, even in re-living the scene.

"Long after—I think three months, I learned the story. The Old Lama of the monastery told me that the Nameless Monk had chosen to enter the grotto and end his life there in prayer and meditation. He would be fed daily through the gutter. He would be without light, and when the winter came, only his tattered robe would warm his body. He would wait, perhaps a year, perhaps fifty years, until at last he would stretch out his skinny arms and greet death in the form of a splendid, brilliant rainbow of light. Then and only then would his soul be cleansed and ready for its reward."

Ford stared at me intently.

"Do you realize what effect that secret can have on a man? Do you know the hell it opened up for me?"

I shook my head. I didn't trust my voice.

"I couldn't stand it," he said, and gulped half a glass of scotch. "Every day for twelve long months, I watched a single monk climb the hill to the temple. For a long year, I watched him with the bowl of food which he would push along the slimy sides of the gutter to the *thing* that lived beyond the wall.

His voice was shaking.

"Do you think I could go on living, and knowing that a man, a breathing, suffering mortal was sealed beyond that wall? Every

night I dreamed of him. I saw him sitting there, eyes glazed over, arms hanging at his sides, waiting—for death. Death that might be kind and overtake him soon. Death that might wait fifty long years before it greeted him with cold arms. I lay awake, listening to that sacred dog howling out his lungs in the freezing stillness of the Tibetan night. I was going crazy. One night I had had enough.

"I left the monastery quietly and studied the hillside, naked under the moon. There was no one abroad for it was late. I hurried to the temple and listened, bending with my ear close to the gutter. There was no sound, and yet I knew that he was alive, for each day the bowl that carried food to him, returned empty.

"I found a slab of stone, and ripped it from the altar. The sacred dog was highly agitated by the whole thing. He sat on his haunches, growling and snarling, but never daring to come near. I was a madman by then, thinking only that I must save a mortal from slow death. I started hacking away at the wall.

"It was back-breaking work, but at last, every muscle in my body aching, perspiration pouring down my face, I managed to break open a small hole. It seemed hours before I had an opening large enough to crawl through. On my hands and knees, I found my way into the crypt. He was there all right, and he was alive.

"His eyes were sightless. He was hardly more than a skeleton, covered by pale, unhealthy skin, and clothed in the filthy remnants of his robe. He had no power to protest and I forced him through the hole and he tottered and fell flat on the cold stone floor of the temple."

**J**ASON FORD trembled from head to foot. His arms, suddenly relaxed, dropped to the leather arms of the chair. He sighed.

"The cold night air hit his body, and he

shivered—and died. The shock had been too great. The man had lived for a year in his tomb, and now, finding life once more, had been unable to face it. They found us there, for I had pressed myself close to his poor, freezing body, trying to force some of my own heat into it—trying to save something that could not be saved. They left the frame of him there in the temple and it was devoured, as is the custom, by the sacred dog.”

Ford was utterly exhausted by his story. Now his voice became stronger and a touch of irony entered it.

They did not punish me. They said I was no longer fit to be one of them. I was at liberty to leave Tibet, but should I ever come that way again, I would be beheaded.

“All hope for the Nameless Monk, they said, was gone. I had taken away his only chance to enter a heavenly place, and his soul would be consigned to purgatory. They told me that, and prayed for me, that the Nameless Monk would not return and wreak his vengeance upon me for what I had done.”

The story might have ended there. It didn't. Jason Ford left Washington a week later. I spent several months in South America, and had what I imagine were some rather tame experiences compared with Ford's trip into the Dark Continent. Some time later, while resting a week at my Arizona home, I received this note from Vermont.

Dear Mark Billings:

I have settled for the summer in the town of Mayerville, Vermont. Come when you have time, and we'll spend a week consuming a case of scotch which I brought with me from London. By the way, Mark, the sacred dog of the Temple of Linga is howling again. I'm afraid he means business.

Your Good Friend  
and Drinking Companion,  
Jason Ford

I hadn't planned a vacation. I didn't relish that trip east. I wanted to sit alone on my own front porch, absorbing good whiskey and admiring the barren beauty of the desert.

*The sacred dog of the Temple of Linga*  
...

I caught a plane from Tucson and arrived in New York the following morning. A fast train dropped me off at Mayerville, Vermont, just two days after I left home. It was a sleepy little farmer's town, hidden under the brow of a vast, evergreen clad mountain. I had some trouble finding a man who knew where Jason Ford had settled, but at last the clerk at the local grocery store gave me the necessary instructions for finding him.

There was no taxi at Mayerville, so I walked the entire five miles to the lonely little shingled cottage built well back from the equally lonely road.

I wish I had never found it.

THE house was neat appearing from the outside, and hidden among the pines about fifty yards from the rutted road. It was very old, with two windows and a single door that stared down at me like a weather-beaten face, and not at all friendly in its leering intentness. The shingles were brown and aged, and the white trim was chipping off.

There was a lean-to kitchen attached to the rear of the place, and the whole thing seemed to be supported by the steep hill at the rear, against which the lean-to was built. I had often seen the arrangement, built in a manner to allow a tunnel into the hillside, where food was preserved from the warmth of summer weather.

My knock brought only the sudden response of a barking dog. I don't know why the sound chilled my blood, but I remembered at once the sacred dog and the fact that Ford had mentioned the beast in his letter. I knocked several times, and finally, in

desperation, I tried the door. It was open.

Until now, I had cursed myself for coming so far, only to find that Jason Ford had never so much as entered this place. I knew at once that he was here, or had been, for about the dusty front room was stacked trunk upon trunk, and pieces of his equipment were in evidence immediately. My eyes noted the elephant tusk tossed into a corner, and the African witch-doctor's headpiece hanging on its tip. Across one of the trunks lay the brilliant red robe and peaked cap of a Tibetan monk.

"Jason," I called. "It's Mark Billings, and I'm damned well thirsty."

No reply. The dog sneaked into the room, his tail curled tightly between his legs, and stood by the door with his teeth barred. I called again, but I didn't expect an answer. The dog, a mangy, filthy creature, growled at me.

I went toward him slowly, and tried to quiet him with my voice. I knew that I must pet him if possible and assure him that I was a friend. He would have nothing to do with me, but turned and slunk into the kitchen.

I had decided to search the entire house, then leave a note for Jason and return, for the night, to Mayerville. Jason would probably show up by tomorrow. I could hardly blame him for not being at home, for I hadn't notified him that I was coming.

I entered the kitchen. I had been right about the lean-to. Evidently the wall had been cut through to the hill and a tunnel constructed into the rock. These tunnels made excellent storage places for all manner of foods.

One thing troubled me deeply. *The place where the wall of the house had been cut through, was sealed up tightly with huge, well worn slabs of rock.*

The dog howled at that moment, crossed the floor and stretched his lean frame out against the pine flooring. He pressed

himself tightly to the rock wall, as though he was guarding whatever lay beyond.

I stared about the dark kitchen, and a feeling of indescribable horror came over me. The kitchen range, a wood burner, was rusted and in terrible condition. On its top were two brass bowls. One was filled with dried, shelled corn. The other was half full of dirty water. A little row of god images stared at me from the semi-darkness. At this moment, I knew that the wall was more than the sealed entrance to a cold-cellar. It was a reproduction of the Samde-puk, grotto of the doomed monk.

Jason Ford was sealed behind that wall, and he was not sealed there by his own hand. I can't attempt to explain my reasoning, for I did not try to explain it logically. The stones were all in place, smooth and thick, and sealed from the outside.

*I knew that I would never open the crypt.*

I should. I should tear those stones down as fast as I could, and attempt to rescue what lay behind that wall. Jason Ford had not chosen this place for his home. He had been lured here, and had been sealed into that tunnel.

**T**HERE was a sickening fear inside me. Once a monk had been sealed within a grotto. He had gone there of his own accord, and a white man had delivered him from a fate that he had been willing to face. The monk had had his revenge.

Jason Ford was alive, I thought. He would remain alive for a time, and I was, in reality, standing in the Temple of Linga, staring at the grotto and at the altar. I was alone here, with the sacred dog, and . . . ?

The dog howled at that moment, and I tried to thrust from my mind the image of the sniveling, groveling creature behind the wall. I tried to pray for strength, but prayer failed me in the presence of those Tibetan gods. I saw

monks parading before me as shadows. Their weird peaked caps hid their faces, so that I was aware only of coal-black, accusing eyes.

*I knew that I wasn't capable of saving Jason Ford's life.*

Most of all, I was incapable of facing the torture that was sure to come to me if I chose to tear down that wall. A coward? Yes! Of course I'm a coward. I think you might have been a coward also, if you had to dream of being sealed into the cold, dark grotto of Samde-puk.

I think you would have fled as I did, with the howl of the sacred dog echoing in your ears. I think you would have shivered in wretchedness until you were safely aboard your train, and then, in the privacy of your compartment, buried your head in your arms and sobbed like a child.

I can't be sure that all men are as cowardly as I.

Perhaps they found Jason Ford's body.

If they did, the storekeeper no doubt remembered that I had asked him where I could find Ford. I was never seen in or about Mayerville after that night. I suppose they called it murder and blamed the whole incident upon me, the "mysterious visitor." It's just as well.

I wonder if, locked behind that wall, alone with his thoughts, Jason Ford finally found the true salvation? I know that I am too much of a coward to interfere with the affairs of ghostly Tibetan monks. Perhaps if you had been there, events would have turned out otherwise. Perhaps you would have torn down the wall and found him alive.

If you had, perhaps *you* would have been sealed in such a place. Perhaps you would have been taught the words that Jason Ford must have found ample time to repeat over and over, desperately, behind the wall of his carrion crypt.

*Om-mani-padme-hum* — Salvation is found only in the true faith.