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A Thing Of Beauty

by Wallace West

Wallace West is another of the many well-known writers of imaginative fiction who made their debut in Farnsworth Wright's WEIRD TALES. There is a deceptive aura of fun that runs through his novels, for sardonic humor, the shocking, and the terrifying may peer through or emerge at any moment. Despite his openness to all bizarre themes, Mr. Wright did, at times, reject a story as too horrible; and here is one occasion where we feel that he was the loser, and we are the gainers.

EACH WINTER day at dawn old John Short scurried along the snow-covered streets of Cloverdale enroute to open the drafts of the furnace which spread a little warmth through Medical College.

Milkmen and other early-risers chuckled as they saw him limping past, whistling a lively tune or reciting snatches of poetry. The very sight of him, they said, brought them good luck that day.

But it was not the thought of poking into the bowels of the furnace or carting out the ashes which made the hunchback's lips pucker with the notes of "Only a Bird in a Gilded Cage" or roll out a Wordsworthian sonnet. It was the anticipation of his weazened face to beam like the not-yet-risen sun.

Short, you see, also was in charge of the brine vat in which floated the corpses kept for dissection by the students of

Northern Med. For more years than Henry Wyndam, N.M.C.'s white-haired president, could remember, Old John had tended the "Stiff Room" when he was not nursing the furnace or bedeviling the school librarian for more books of poetry.

Every morning, as soon as the leaky radiators began clanking in the empty classrooms, Short would brush the ashes from his overalls, rub his gnarled hands and take from its corner a fifteen-foot pole with a hook on the end. Then he would head for the brine vat, whistling as he went.

John's greeting to his charges had once been overheard by a student who had come to school early to make up some back work, but had been forced to seek the furnace room to warm his half-frozen hands and feet.

"I tell you, I heard him talking to those stiffs just as if they'd been alive," the boy related afterward with a noticeable lack of that *sang froid* upon which prospective doctors pride themselves.

"I was standing by the furnace when I heard him go by, dragging something along the floor. I followed, thinking I'd play a joke on him.

"He reached the stiff room before I caught up. As he had left the door open, I slipped inside with the idea of setting up

a groan which would scare the wits out of him."

The student stopped, rolled a cigarette with fingers which shook slightly, lighted it on the third try, and inhaled mightily.

"Well, go on, Moony," suggested one of his cronies. "What happened when you yowled?"

"I didn't yowl. . . . You know that gas jet with the evil purple globe which sticks out over the vat? Well, Old John was standing so its beams fell directly on his ugly mug. For a long time he just stood there, with his long hairy arms on his crooked hips, laughing fit to kill. But he didn't make a sound!

"Then he reached out with a long pole and hooked the end of it under the armpit of one of the stiffs. . . ."

"Aw, cut it," snapped one of Moony's listeners. "I've just had lunch."

"Old John pulled the body up to the edge of the vat and turned it 'round so it faced him. Then he sat down on the edge of the pool and swung his crooked legs back and forth.

"'Mornin', Mike,' he said, friendly-like. 'Your skin's in the sere and yellow leaf, but it's still nice and firm, ain't it? Can't say I don't take care of you, can you, Mike boy?'"

"Well?" Moony's auditors had lost their grins. They pressed closer.

"Well, that stiff rolled back

and forth in the little waves which John had made dragging it in, and damned if it didn't seem half alive.

"Thought you were pretty fine when you worked 'in the blacksmith shop, didn't you?" John went on as if he were talking to an old friend. "Remember how proud you were of your big muscles — like iron bands, didn't the poet say? Picked me up with one hand and laughed at my crooked back once. Remember? Didn't think then you'd be hanged for murder and wind up in a brine vat talking to me, did you, Mike?"

"The old man seemed to listen as if for an answer," Moony continued. "Then he nodded cheerfully and reached out his pole. 'Sure I'll roll you over — roll you over slow,' he said. 'Course you don't want your face to get any blacker than it already is. Proud of your looks to the last, ain't you, Mike? Just wait till I send you to the dissecting room.'

"John laughed that silent laugh again. Then he flipped the big fellow over like a dead fish and reached for another corpse."

"What'd he say next, Moony?" someone inquired.

"I — I don't know. I felt kinda sick — the air down there always gets me, you know. I went upstairs."

After that the students tried teasing the janitor about his

friends in the vat. But they didn't keep it up; for the first time they could remember, Short lost his good humor and snarled at them. From that time on he kept the stiff room door locked, except when receiving a body or sending one to the operating table.

But the youngsters, killing time by telling horror stories between classes, insisted that Old John still held his morning conversations, twitting his charges about their fine physiques, jeering at their former intelligence and stations in life; boasting that he, with his broken body, had become their master in the end.

SHORT'S IDYLLIC life received a shock on the day that the body of Miss X was delivered to the college in accordance with the wish found in a scribbled note when police broke into a gas-filled room at the Cloverdale Hotel.

Beaming with delight, Old John received the corpse from the coroner, trundled it into the basement on a sort of wheelbarrow and stripped off the winding sheet preparatory to pushing the nude body into his vat.

Then he stopped, his mouth forming a great O, his red-rimmed eyes popping. Before him was the most beautiful creature he had ever looked upon. Slim, long-limbed and exquisite, lying as if she were

only asleep, Miss X seemed to light up the dingy room.

John's ugly face was transformed. He ran his calloused fingers through that halo of golden curls and touched the closed eyelids tenderly. Then, as he lifted the rigid figure in his arms and lowered it into the liquid of the vat, he mumbled, like a prayer, a snatch from Keat's "Ode to a Grecian Urn."

*"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,
— that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye
need to know."*

After that day, not even the milkman saw John Short, so early in the morning did he skitter from his shack to the college basement.

Once there, he did not stop to fire the furnace but raced to the stiff room, so afraid was he that someone might have stolen his treasure.

Forgotten were the other bodies at which he once had mocked. Now he sat for hours, staring down at the half-drowned, changeless Miss X, or straining his little eyes and setting the echoes atwitter as he read from a precious, dog-eared volume of Keats, Shelley, or Coleridge. Old John, born in agony and squalor, raised in filth and degradation and living to be the hideous laughing stock of all men, at long last had found something which, to his cloud-

ed mind, seemed ageless and beautiful.

"Oh, if I had been straight and strong and young, I might have found you before you stuffed those cracks in the windows and turned on the gas — I might have saved you from this," he would moan after he had turned the body on its back. (Dead women float face downward while men lie with their dead eyes glaring at the sky.) "Yet, if I had not been what I am, I might never have found you." And he would recite softly:

*" 'A thing of beauty is a joy
forever:
Its loveliness increases; it will
never
Pass into nothingness.' "*

Then, as an angry roaring from the furnace room told him that President Wyndham was in his office and furious because of the icy radiators, he would push the body into the darkest corner of the pool and hurry out, locking and double-barring the door.

Whenever a call would come for a cadaver, Short would allow no one in the stiff room but himself. Tugging and splashing at the edge of the vat he would somehow manage to drag out one of his neglected charges. Then he would appear at the door, panting and chuckling, to turn over the body to the stu-

dent who had been sent for it.

The janitor's moodiness and neglect of his duties could not fail to come to the attention of President Wyndham.

"Poor Short is getting feeble," sighed that other elderly man. "We'll hire an assistant to do the heavy work."

And so a weak-chinned Swedish lad was installed in the furnace room and the radiators whistled as they had not done in years.

The newcomer lived in constant dread of Old John, despite Wyndham's assurances. When not actually at work on the fires he could always be seen, no matter how cold the weather, standing outside the basement door and casting frightened glances over his shoulder.

"Aye don't like dat faller. He bane a hex," was all Olaf would say when the rowdies upstairs twitted him.

ANOTHER ELEMENT began to threaten John's happiness as the dreary winter months passed. Hard times were creeping upon Northern Med. Bryan thundered about "Free Silver" but there was little of it available as 1893 crawled into 1894. Endowments were not forthcoming as of old. Interest on invested funds fell away. Enrollments decreased. It was a time sacred to the Goat God — a time of panic.

Wyndham now sat for long

hours in his cold, walnut-panelled office, gnawing his scraggly moustache and thinking up schemes to keep the school going. Despite his labors, the situation grew steadily worse.

Seldom were corpses delivered to Old John now. They cost money, just as did coal and surgical instruments. Instead of twenty bodies, he had eighteen . . . then twelve . . . then five.

Now a different tone crept into his conversations with Miss X. Despair and fright made him tremble as with the palsy when he crouched beside the salt-encrusted vat.

"They shan't have you," he would whisper, glancing toward the door where he was confident that Olaf stood eavesdropping. "You shall never be reduced to dripping bones and sinews by those glistening knives. They'll never send you in pieces to the Potters' Field. Didn't the poet say:

*"That dead men rise up never;
That even the weariest river
Winds somewhere safe to sea."*

"Have no fear." Then he would shake his knobby fists in the direction of Wyndham's office and scream: "Do you hear, you old fool? You shan't lay a scalpel on her."

The body, perhaps shaken by sound vibrations, would seem to nod its golden head in approval.

CAME THE TIME when the only body left in the pool was that of Miss X.

Came the time when "Moony", now an assistant professor in the dissecting room, sent down a requisition for another corpse.

Half an hour later he looked up from directing a delicate operation to see Old John crouched blinking in the doorway.

"Got that stiff ready?" he smiled as he stripped off his rubber gloves.

"Sorry, Mr. Perkins, sir. I haven't any more. The vat is empty."

"The devil! Is it as bad as that? I thought we had one left. I'll speak to President Wyndham about this at once."

"I - I wouldn't bother him, sir," stammered the janitor. "I give you my word there are no more."

Surprised by the tone and the stealthily shifting eyes, Moony glanced sharply at the old man.

"It's not your fault, John," he said soothingly. "Don't take it so hard. Here, come with me. We'll both talk to Mr. Wyndham about getting some new raw material." He started out the door.

"Wait! Wait!" The janitor gripped his arm, unmindful of the staring students. "Don't do anything yet. Perhaps I was mistaken. I - I forgot. I think there's one stiff left. It's badly mutilated. I thought - I didn't

think you'd want that one. I'll have it ready in an hour."

"Why, you dithering old fool . . ." Moony began. But the cripple already was lurching down the hall as fast as his legs could carry him.

HALF AN HOUR later a blood-smeared apparition burst howling into Wyndham's office.

It was Olaf, but he was hardly recognizable; there was a deep gash in his scalp from which blood was pouring. His eyes were wild with pain and terror.

"Ow, Mr. Wyndham," he gabbled as he clung to the president's desk. "Something bane hit me. I lean over firebox. I poke furnace. Then . . ." He slumped to the floor.

"Perkins!" Wyndham shouted through the operating room door. Moony came running. As they bound up the jagged wound, suspicions gripped the young doctor. He repeated his conversation with Short.

"But that's nonsense," snapped Wyndham as he washed Olaf's blood off his hands. "There is another body down there. I ran across the requisition just this morning. Here it is, on my desk. On September first of last yaeer we accepted the body of a Miss X from the coroner.

"Short could have had nothing to do with this. Something must have fallen off the furnace and struck Olaf on the head. This

boy will be coming 'round in a minute. Then we'll go down and make Old John let us look in the vat."

"You stay here and care for him," Moony said tensely. "I'll talk to John."

He ran downstairs and shouted for the janitor.

There was no answer. The furnace room was deserted.

"John," he called, rattling the locked door of the vat room. "Open the door at once. Wyndham's orders!"

"The old fool is angry because I wouldn't believe him," Moony grunted when there was no reply. "I suppose he's gone home in a huff."

He returned to the furnace room and bellowed up the speaking tube.

"Break down the door," the command came rasping down to him. "There's going to be no mystery around this college."

"I'll be with you in a second."

The president found the professor, heavy shovel in hand, standing puzzled just inside the wreckage of the stiff room entrance.

"That's funny, sir," the young man stammered as he felt the other's hand on his shoulder. "What on earth could have induced Old John to say the vat was empty? There are two bodies floating in it."



A spare-time author, Wallace West's short science fiction stories have appeared in *Boy's Life*, as well as the regular science fiction magazines. Five of his novels have appeared in hard covers, one of them, "The Memory Bank" issued in paperback by Airmont last year. His ambition, he tells us, is to write a historical novel of colonial New York City — if he can find a publisher who will accept a historically accurate account of that scandalous, ribald era which makes the traditional current "sexy" historical novel sound tame by comparison.

