

Weird Tales

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A TRYST WITH DEATH

By EDGAR WHITE

"I DO not know, but somehow I feel if you would venture there some time after the 'turn of the night,' I would know that you were there, and that good would come of it. If there is any way to make my presence known to you I will do it. We may be quite near—you and I—to the Great Revelation. Who knows?"

The man who penned those lines stood closer to the Great Revelation than he perhaps suspected. A few days later Dr. Robert St. Clair contracted a malady from one of his patients and his death swiftly followed, as his constitution had been weakened from over-work. His remains now rested in Oakland cemetery, overlooking the Mississippi. By his request they were brought to the old home town for interment—he wanted to hear the ripple of the great river that had been the playground of our youth. The quotation was from the last letter he had written me.

In some respects Dr. St. Clair was odd. He had never become a convert to spirit communication, but he sought the answer to the riddle as diligently as some men seek gold in the mountains. He wanted to know. From the coal miners he had learned there was a sort of inner movement of the earth along about midnight. At that hour rock would fall in the pit and the cross timbers would groan under their weight. It was a period when all the hidden forces of nature were in action. The doctor held the theory

that if those on the farther shore could deliver a message, or make their presence known here, it would be along about that period. In his letter he spoke rather wistfully of wishing I would try the experiment with him in case he was called first, and I conjectured that when he learned his malady would end in his death, he stipulated that his remains be brought to our cemetery, where the matter would be convenient, if any place could be "convenient" for a man to go out to a graveyard after midnight and there await the appearance of a shadowy form from the other side.

By nature I'm intensely practical. Being a newspaper man, I'm rather cynical about ghosts, spirit communication, ouija boards and fortune-tellers. But I recalled with a rather queer sensation that the day before I received the telegram announcing the doctor's death I labored under a queer fit of depression. It seemed as if something was going to happen. The doctor had spoken of these things, and cited several startling instances.

I didn't relish that experiment in the graveyard; not that I expected to see or hear anything, but I had the apprehension that one often feels, no matter how case-hardened, that something unusual might happen. The doctor and I had been very close friends until he left to go to the city, since which time we had corresponded occasionally. He never married—too busy, I suppose.

Of course I had to go out there and see the fool business through. I loaded up with cigars and matches and carried a heavy walking-stick. The stick was for dogs and tramps. It would be useless against the sort of "people" I might be going to meet, I knew.

Oakland is a lovely cemetery. It is on a rolling bluegrass hill running right up to the bluffs of the great river. There are many beautiful trees. I've known of men who died thousands of miles away and asked that they be buried in our cemetery because of its singular picturesqueness and solemnity.

It was a pretty, moonlight night, and I chose to walk rather than hire a car. I knew all about the place—in day time. You rarely see people who have business in a graveyard at night. The trees were grotesquely large and the thick foliage shut out the rays of the moon. It was intensely dark, but I had a flashlight and could follow the driveway. At times there would be queer rustlings among the grass and leaves. Occasionally there was the distant cry of a night bird, and the strange bay of a hound.

"Sacred to the memory of—"

I knew how all those headstones read, terminal marks for life's journey. On the very old ones were indexes pointing upward, always upward. God grant "they" traveled that way.

"If there is a way—"

I shuddered. In a moment I would know. The vault was on a sort of cleared space, not far from the edge of the tall bluff, the foot of which was lashed by the tide.

"HELLO!" I cried.

A woman was standing at the front of the vault, moving her arms dramatically. She wheeled on me, and I was startled by the unearthly beauty of her pallid face. Cold shivers ran down my spine. I might as well set

it down right here that I believed I had met a being from the other world—the time, the place, the dark dress, with the hood thrown back revealing a face of rare loveliness, but pale as death—what could it mean? But she broke the spell:

"Who are you?"

Her voice quivered with emotion. She had been weeping.

"A good friend of Dr. St. Clair's," I replied, and my voice showed the agitation I felt. "Did you know him?"

It was evident my presence had not scared her, and that was why I still regarded her with doubt.

"Yes. He saved me from hunger—then killed my soul!"

I cannot convey the intensity of the words. As she stood there, her hands clenched, with deep furrows in her forehead, I wondered whether she was human or something sent up by the fiend to curse the dead. Certainly none with a right heart could feel bitter toward a man like Dr. St. Clair.

"You are a friend of his—then listen," she went on passionately. "He never wronged me in the usual way—not that. But he was always kind and gentle and good whenever he came about me; he would lay his hand on my shoulder and call me 'his good little girl.' I was a nurse, and he let me love him—love! Why, I would have died for him, and he knew it! He knew it as well as if I had told him. But I was no more to him than the boards he walked on!"

"Go on," I said, sitting down on a bench near the vault.

"He died suddenly and I never got to tell him," she said. "But I knew he had an odd fancy that the dead might come back over their graves and communicate with the living. His idea was they awakened after midnight. And I came all the way to

tell him what I thought of him—I— I love him so!"

She stamped her feet. Then she broke down crying and flung herself on the bench beside me. She looked intensely young and childish, and it was hard to keep away from the idea that she wasn't a woodland fairy, crushed and bruised, out there in the moonlight.

"Listen, little friend," I said, "I have known the man you speak of much longer than you have. You have simply mistaken him. I'd stake my life on his honor toward women. If he let you love him he loved you. You can set that down."

She stopped crying and straightened up, moving a little closer toward me.

"I am here tonight at his request, as conveyed in the last letter he wrote me", I went on. "I have that letter with me. What is your name?" I asked abruptly.

"Agnes Lindell," she whispered.

"That's the name," I told her, "and you can see it in a few moments yourself. Now listen here," and I held the flashlight to the paper: "In our hospital is a young lady named Agnes Lindell, one of the sweetest and most faithful girls I have ever seen. I can imagine your ironical smile at this, coming from a hard-boiled woman-hater like myself. To no other person would I make the statement, and you know me too well to attribute it to boastfulness, but this dear little girl is so grateful to me for a fancied service that she thinks I'm the greatest fellow in the world. If I wasn't sure her feeling is founded altogether on gratitude, I'd ask her to marry me, despite my being many years older, but I can't get away from the conviction that it would be wrong to take advantage of my influence over her. I love her too much for that. God knows I want to do what's right, and should anything ever happen to me,

Jim, and you could find her, I wish you'd tell her that with my last breath my thoughts were of her."

The girl reached gently over and took the letter from my hand.

"It's mine by rights," she murmured.

I nodded. "It's yours."

She fixed it in her bosom some way, taking extraordinary pains, it seemed to me, to secure it with pins. Then she smiled and impulsively held out her hand.

"I'm so glad I met you," she said in a deep, melodious voice which seemed to be hers by birthright.

Her face was serene and happy.

"It was rather lucky," I remarked, "but it's getting chilly out here—hadn't we better be going back?"

We were standing close together, she hanging to my arm as we strolled slowly along.

"Do you believe the people up there understand the truth of all these things that worry us so down here?" she asked, looking eagerly into my eyes.

"Most assuredly," I replied. "There is no doubting up there, no grief, no sorrow at separation."

WE WERE following the path close to the edge of the bluff. An icy chill, like the breath of death, came up from the dark waters below. Suddenly to the northeast a long, slender, pink streak of light appeared over the trees on the far side of the river.

"Look!" she cried, letting go of my arm. "The dawn is breaking It's all light over there he's calling calling to me I see him Doctor!—Robert! I'm coming!"

And before I could reach her she ran to the edge of the high bluff and leaped off like a bird!