

WEIRD TALES *The Unique Magazine*

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AN EYE FOR AN EYE

By G. W. Crane

"BUT mother is too sick to be moved!" the girl said imploringly. She was rather slim, and a trifle taller than the average. Her face was beautiful despite the paleness of her cheeks and the slightly dark circles beneath her eyes. She taught the first grade pupils in the little community, and they literally worshipped her.

"If you will give me only a little more time, I am sure that I can get the money," she continued, and then waited anxiously for the wizen-faced man to reply.

in the money to pay off the mortgage by tomorrow morning."

"But please, Mr. Seaman, I have no money! Mother's illness has taken everything I had and more, too, but if you will wait just a little longer. . . ."

"That will do! That will do!" the old man spoke in a rasping voice. "I've been too good to you already. And, then, there's that little shack at the other edge of the village. You can move into that. It won't hurt ye."

"But I tell you that mother is too ill to be moved!" the girl spoke desperately.

The shriveled old man waved his hand in a gesture of dismissal.



"Haven't you any sympathy at all?" the young woman asked in one last appeal.

"Sympathy? Bosh! That's all foolishness! It leads to bankruptcy. That's what I always used to tell your father before he died, but no, he could not see it that way," the old man spoke with infinite sarcasm. "Now don't disturb me any longer. There's the door!" and he waved a claw-like hand in its direction.

The girl stood irresolutely a moment, while her face alternately

"No, sir!" the latter answered roughly, as he rubbed his hands together and frowned upon the girl. "Business is business! I've been wanting that house of yours for several years, and now I'm going to have it, unless," he smiled grimly, "you bring

flushed and then grew pale. She felt once as if she could murder the heartless old skinflint as he sat at his desk. There was no way to get the money, and she perceived that she was absolutely in the hands of this merciless creature. With rage and despair consuming her spirit, she left the room.

The next day the girl and her invalid mother were forced to leave their cozy little home, and move into the damp, decaying house at the other end of the village. Neighbors insisted that the sick woman come into their homes, but even in her illness the invalid was too proud to do so.

Two weeks later the suffering of the poor woman was at an end. Out in the cemetery a haggard girl watched the lumpy, half-frozen clods of earth fall down upon the casket and shut in forever the body of her loved one. She did not leave with most of her neighbors who had attended the funeral, but stood silent, watching the swiftly filling hole.

Her eyes were dry. There were no tears left to soothe her. She had wept at the words of the minister, but now she had ceased. A fierce bitterness filled her heart.

When the mound had been finished, the pastor gently touched her arm, intending to lead her back to the carriage. But the girl fiercely shook off the friendly hand.

"Leave me alone!" she said.

"But it is damp and cold, and I want you to ride back home. All the other vehicles have gone."

"I can walk," she answered shortly.

The minister regarded her a moment and decided that it might be best to let her remain. He began to retrace his steps toward his conveyance. Reaching a bend in the road, he looked back, but the solitary figure was still standing motionless.

By most of the villagers Mr. Seaman was considered to be the stingiest, most tight-fisted old skinflint that ever lived. The older he became, the more his mercilessness seemed to increase. Even the dogs—when they saw him coming down the street—got out of his way.

The old man lived in a small ranshackle cottage at the edge of the village, and no one ever visited him there. He had a little office above the local bank, and it was in this that his callers found him when they wished to adjust money matters.

For several weeks the old man had been feeling a peculiar numbness all along his right side. At first he paid scarcely any heed to it, but it did not go away. As a result, he began to pinch his right leg every morning to see whether he was any better. He could notice no improvement, and as time passed, he believed that he was getting worse.

"I suppose it's just because I'm gettin' older'n I used to be," he thought, but this did not comfort him at all.

As a consequence, he determined to consult the town's physician, and although he regretted wasting his money in this manner, he went up to see Dr. Jackson.

The physician told him that it acted very much like paralysis, and that a complete numbness of his whole body might result. Although this might be gradual, he said, it could occur at a sudden stroke.

The doctor did not try especially to allay the old man's fears, for he shared the popular feeling toward the miser, and he saw that he was very susceptible to suggestion.

Sherman came away very much frightened. He did not appear to fear death itself, strange as this would seem. Perhaps it never occurred to him that his paralysis might be fatal. What really terrified him, however, was the idea that he might be rendered incapable of making either movement or sound, and that then he would be buried alive. This thought of being locked up in a coffin while he was not actually dead, haunted him day and night.

In his sleep he would dream of being locked within a casket, unable to utter a word, yet comprehending all that went on around him. He could hear the dirt fall shovelful after shovelful upon the box in which he was imprisoned. He could feel the air becoming oppressive.

Then he would swing his arms sideways, only to find himself shut in. He would kick, and endeavor to lift the lid, but six feet of damp earth would be crushing it down against his feeble efforts. He would beat frantically upon the encircling boards, but the hard-packed earth would muffle the sound. He could feel the pitch-blackness of his stifling tomb.

He could not see. He had used up almost all the air within his narrow coffin. He could imagine the grave-diggers walking around complacently several feet above him. If he could only make them hear! He was smothering—buried alive!

With a scream of horror he would waken, and lay panting, as he tried to recover from his nightmare. But he could not entirely push these dreams away, for he knew that there might be some truth in them. He had already seen an article in a magazine telling of just such a case. He decided that he must find the article again.

Searching for several hours through the pile of magazines which he kept stacked within one of his small rooms, he at length came upon the story which he had been seeking. Although

it frightened him, he could not help reading it again.

He learned that for some reason the buried man had been dug up a few weeks after his interment, and when the casket had been opened, the dead man was found lying on his stomach with one hand clutching his scalp, from which most of the hair had been torn off.

Fascinated by the horror of the tale, he found himself reading it again. He could not help himself. For the remainder of the night he would lie thinking of the possibility that he himself might be buried alive.

In the daytime he was obsessed with this same thought. Even while he walked down the street to his office—and he found it more difficult to do so each day—he could clearly imagine himself so paralyzed that the neighbors might take him to be dead. Mentally he could see them gathering around his bedside. He could feel them lift him into the casket. He could feel himself driven to the cemetery, and lowered into the cold ground, all the while powerless to cry out or show in any way that he still lived. This idea almost smothered him, even while he was wide awake.

He grew haggard because of his fear, and would go about the town muttering to himself, and occasionally flinging out his arms, as if to push off something that seemed to be enveloping him. People thought that he was going crazy, and, indeed, his actions tended further to substantiate their judgment, for he grew more queer from day to day.

At last he went back to see Dr. Jackson, and confided his fears to him. The latter only laughed, and told him not to worry for the townspeople would not bury him before he was entirely dead.

"Anyway," the Doctor added, "the embalming fluid will kill you if you aren't dead already."

"No! No! No!" screamed the terrified old man. "I won't be embalmed! I won't be embalmed!" and his voice rose more shrilly at each repetition. "Promise me that you won't let them embalm me!" he demanded, and his eyes shone wildly.

The Doctor began to place credence in the reports of the town's gossips concerning the old man's madness.

"But every one's embalmed nowadays," he explained.

"But I don't want to be!" the miser said fiercely, as he began to shudder. "I might not be dead for sure, and if I were not embalmed, then I could come to life again."

The Doctor finally promised that he would not permit the poisonous chemicals to be placed within the old man's veins, in case the latter should die.

"Now there is something else I want you to promise me," the miser

went on. "I have been dreaming that I shall be buried alive. Oh, but I have," he added, as the Doctor began to shake his head. "If I were buried in the usual manner and should wake up . . .," here he trembled, and a look of horror spread over his face. "But I won't be buried that way!" he yelled in a frenzy. "Promise me that you will do as I say," he exclaimed in a tone that expressed a mixture of both command and entreaty.

"Well, what is it?" the Doctor asked curiously.

"I'm going to have a bell placed near my grave with a rope leading down into my coffin, and then, if I revive, I shall pull the cord, and ring the bell."

"But who would hear it?" Dr. Jackson asked, as he vainly strove to check a smile.

"Oh, there is a farm house not far from the cemetery, and somebody there could hear it, and come and dig me up."

"You'd smother before they could ever get to you," the Doctor objected.

"No! No! I have everything planned, and I have it written down so that you can do it just as I wish. I'll pay you now for your trouble," and he handed the Doctor a fifty-dollar bill. "Promise me that you will do it," he pleaded.

Dr. Jackson, thinking it all to be nonsense, nevertheless promised, and the miser slowly hobbled off.

The Doctor thought it all a good joke, and the news soon spread about the village.

"And to think," the Doctor said to a group of men standing in front of the little drug store, "the old tightwad gave me this fifty to see that his fool notions were carried out," and he showed them the bill.

The old man was the object of a great many jokes during the ensuing weeks, but he himself was feeling much more at ease to think that the Doctor had pledged himself to carry out his wishes.

The miser's right leg, however, was growing more and more numb. Each morning he would pinch it to see if there were any feeling left. It became very difficult for him to walk; so he decided to supervise, personally, the erection of the bell.

It was a large iron one much like the ordinary farmhouse dinner bell which the rural housewife uses to notify the men in the field that dinner is ready. The old man had it fastened on a post, which was set in the ground near the spot which he had chosen for his grave.

The time finally came when the shriveled figure of the miser did not appear upon the street, and investigation revealed him lying upon his bed, almost wholly paralyzed. Doctor

Jackson obtained one of the middle-aged women of the village to wait upon him, and give him his food, for he could not even move his arms to feed himself. For a few weeks more he lay in this helpless condition gradually becoming more and more dependent upon his nurse. One morning he failed to open his eyes, and lay motionless, giving no sign of life whatever. Dr. Jackson had a great number of calls to make that day, and so it was not until late in the evening that he could attend the old fellow. Tired out from his labors, the doctor made a hasty examination, and said there was no doubt about his being dead.

Next day the Doctor gave the miser's written instructions to his man-of-all-work, and told him to see that they were fulfilled. The latter had a hole bored in the lid of the coffin, through which the rope was to pass. One end of it was placed in the hand of the corpse, and the remainder of the rope was pushed through a one-inch pipe, and fastened to the bell. The pipe permitted the rope to be pulled easily; otherwise the earth would have checked it. According to the miser's orders, another tube connected the cheap casket with the open air. This was to permit him to breathe if he should not be entirely dead.

The earth was rapidly shoveled into the opening, and in a short time a mound of yellow clay marked the old skinfint's last abode. It was unlike other newly-made graves, however, for a rope reached out of it to the bell near by, and six inches of an air-pipe protruded.

The grave-diggers left the spot, and returned to their homes. The cemetery was deserted unless one believes that the spirits of the dead hover above the last resting place of their bodies.

About three o'clock next morning the sleepy telephone operator in the little office above the drug store received a call.

"Hello! Hello!" a frightened woman's voice exclaimed. "This is Harding's. Say, that bell over in the cemetery has been ringing for ten minutes! It's getting louder and louder! Call the constable or somebody quick! There ain't any men folks at our place now, and we're scared to death!"

The operator was wide awake, for everybody knew the story of the burial of the old miser. She called the Doctor, but could get no response. In desperation she called the grave-diggers, and two others to go out to the ghostly spot. As soon as she had sent them on their weird quest, she called the Harding farmhouse.

"That bell quit ringin' several minutes ago!" Mrs. Harding replied. "I don't know what to think!"

The four men reached the dark cemetery with its eery tombstones faintly visible all about them. Hurriedly, and with conflicting emotions, they ran to the new grave. What they saw startled them so that they almost turned back!

The rope, which had been fastened to the bell, now was tied to the foot of the post. Even as they looked, they could make out a slight movement of the rope! It grew taut, and then they could see it slacken!

"Gosh! He's come back to life!" one of the men whispered hoarsely.

"Look! Look!" his companion almost shouted, and pointed toward the air-pipe.

How it got there, they did not know, but a bucket was forced down over the end of the tube into the fresh earth, cutting off all the air supply from the coffin.

One of the grave-diggers kicked the bucket off, and then they all set to work digging. Frantically, yet fearfully, they threw out the fresh earth. Their lanterns cast weird shadows about them, and dimly lighted up the somber tombstones near by. They scarcely said a word, but when they did, it was in a very low tone.

Thud! A shovel had at last struck the wooden box. It startled the men. They were not any less courageous than the average, but their surroundings and the peculiar situation in which they found themselves would have affected the nerves of anybody.

Quickly they cleared off the top of the coffin.

"Hello! Are you alive?" one of them called in a low voice.

There was no answer.

"I think Hardings imagined they heard the bell ring," one of the men muttered.

"But didn't we see the rope move?" another objected.

"Well, you can open the lid," the first speaker added.

They held their two lanterns down inside the pit which they had just made. The yellow flames flickered and spluttered. The bravest of the four men used his shovel for a lever, and pried up the coffin top.

Slowly, hesitatingly, he peered inside. An unexpected movement from within would have caused him instantly to drop the lid.

He still could not make out the dead man's form. Carefully he jerked the top clear back, and the four spectators were terrified. If they had been out of the pit in which they stood it is doubtful whether they would have remained for a second glance. As it was, they were standing on the edge of the casket, and could not readily escape.

The old man's form was turned over, and hunched up, as if he had

vainly striven to lift the tons of earth that held him a captive. His right arm was stretched out along the side of his prison, and the nails of his fingers were torn off. The sides of the casket were clawed and scratched, and the scalp of the dead man was frightfully lacerated. All his hair had been pulled out by the roots and a wad of it was still fiercely clasped in the miser's left hand.

Even while they looked on a greater fear consumed them.

"*Ha-ha, ha-ha,*" demoniacal laughter came to their ears.

This was too much. Clawing and scrambling, they clambered over each other in trying to get out of the pit.

"*Ha-ha, ha-ha,*" the shrill laughter continued from far up the hillside.

It pursued the fleeing men. To their terrified minds the fiendish sounds seemed to be taken up and re-echoed by each of the tombstones which they passed in their flight.

"*Ha-ha, ha-ha! Ha-ha, ha-ha! Ha-ha, ha-ha!*" The ghostly shrieks rang in their ears, as they raced toward the village.

Unexplained, the mystery continued to frighten the superstitious for two

days after the miser had been re-buried. Then a tragedy partially turned their attention from this weird affair.

The body of the girl whose mother had been turned out of her home, was found floating in the river not far from the little village.

"Too bad!" the Doctor had said. "She must have lost her mind brooding over her mother's death," and this was the consensus of opinion.

And no one ever thought to associate the gentle young school teacher with the fiendish laughter which had floated over the cemetery.