

*A Droll Little Tale
With a Chuckle at the End*

SPIRITS

By J. M. ALVEY

AFTER sunset — say about an hour after, when the shadows have had time to stretch out to their full length, and before the moon has risen—the road that winds down from Monk's Head Ridge is as lonesome and "creepy" a place as I have ever known.

It was down this little-traveled mountain trail that old Uncle Henry Jackson Brown came on his way home from Wednesday night prayer meeting one dark autumn evening. All eyes and ears was Uncle Henry as he plodded along, looking from side to side, his knees jerking up and down under his frock coat as he took up his big feet and put them down again in great haste, for the colored parson at the little church up on the ridge had preached that evening the third of a series of blood-curdling sermons on communication with the dead.

Just where the road becomes the loneliest, and Uncle Henry's eyes were bulging the widest and his heart was racing the fastest, just there, of all places on that deserted highway, he stopped, terrified, and his mouth fell open, for straight ahead, and directly over the roadway, a corpse was hanging from a tree.

"I been a-spectin' it," thought Uncle Henry. "I been a-prophecyin' it to myself. I knowed it was a-goin' to happen. I just felt it in my bones. Oh, why didn't I go home the other way! Oh, why did I take this here short cut!"

"Ho, ho!" sang the corpse. "You're late, brother, you're late. There ain't much blood left, that's a fact."

"Ascuse me," panted Uncle Henry, trembling violently, "ascuse me, but I—I don't want no blood, t-thank you. No, sir. Not me."

"What! No blood!" cried the corpse, with astonishment. "You're missin' a rare opportunity, brother, a rare opportunity."

"I hope I don't 'pear to be no ways uppish," said Uncle Henry, politely, for

he remembered the parson's caution about the proper respect that should be shown to departed brethren, "but I'm an old man on my way home, sir, and if it's all the same to you, sir, I'd like to hurry on. Yes, sir, I'm in a powerful great hurry."

"Well," snarled the corpse, "you can't go till you take a quart o' blood. I only got a little left, and I can't go home myself till I get rid of the last drop."

"I—I'd rather not."

"Ho, ho!" crowed the hanged man, and began to jump up and down and swing back and forth on his rope. "Rather not, eh? Ho, ho! It's a rare opportunity and he says he'd 'rather not.' How much money you got?"

"Two bucks," answered Uncle Henry, his face so white that it showed in the darkness. "Two bucks is all I got. And if you please, sir, I'd be much obliged if you'd not do no more of them gyrations."

"Two bucks," echoed the corpse, paying no attention to the old man's request, but continuing to dance around in the air. "Ho, ho! Two bucks. Come slip it in my pocket."

Uncle Henry's knees grew weaker and his heart was crowding his Adam's apple and his eyes were bulged out by now.

"Come on!" commanded the hanged man. "Come slip it in my pocket. Make it snappy, brother, make it snappy!"

Uncle Henry was too weak to run. He was too frightened to go forward. He stood there, mouth open, back bent, legs sagged, feet rooted to the earth, and stared at the corpse.

"Hurry up! Come slip it in my pocket and get your blood."

"I'm a-comin'," said Uncle Henry, meekly, standing where he was, however, and trembling all the way down into his walking stick. "I'm a-comin'!"

Very slowly he advanced, one big foot at a time, one step backward for every two steps forward.

"You're powerful slow about it," remarked the corpse, impatiently. "Get a move on, man. I can't hang out here all night. Hurry up, brother."

"Yes, sir, I'm a-comin'," whispered Uncle Henry.

He was close enough now to see that the awful figure had no head. The old man shut his eyes and reached out his hand. His heart turned a somersault and his wind pipes snapped shut as he touched the corpse's coat pocket and dropped his two one-dollar bills therein.

Immediately something cold and clammy touched his face and fell slowly to the ground.

The hanged man laughed.

The old man dropped to his knees; put his hands together; moved his quivering lips in prayer. In his fervor he forgot what had been hanging over his head, and he opened his eyes and turned them heavenward.

The corpse had disappeared!

"Good-by, Lord," said Uncle Henry, cutting his prayer short. "I see my way clear to get home now. Good-by."

He put his hands down to help himself up and touched something cold. It felt familiar and he picked it up. It was a bottle with a string tied to the neck.

"Blood!" cried Uncle Henry. "Two bucks worth o' blood!" The very idea horrified him. The bottle slipped from his shaky hand to the ground and smashed.

The odor that rose to Uncle Henry's nose was not that of blood. It was a well-known smell.

"Spirits!" cried the old man. "Lord A'mighty! Spirits, sure enough!"

"Go on home, you old fool," said a voice up in the tree. "Clear out o' here. I'm goin' to let my dummy down ag'in. I hear another customer comin' down the hill. Go on. Get out o' here."

"Somebody's a-profitin' by the parson's sermons, at any rate," mumbled Uncle Henry, as he went sorrowfully on down the Monk's Head Ridge road through the dark.

Table of Contents

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Why <i>Weird Tales</i> ?— <i>Editorial</i>	1
Imprisoned With the Pharaohs— <i>Houdini</i>	3
"Whoso Diggeth a Pit"— <i>Vida Taylor Adams</i>	13
Deep Calleth— <i>Gordon Burns</i>	16
The Malignant Entity— <i>Otis Adelbert Kline</i>	19
The Sixth Tree— <i>Edith Lichty Stewart</i>	27
The Haunted Mansion in the Pines— <i>Leonard F. Schumann</i>	29
Spirits— <i>J. M. Alvey</i>	32
Hypnos— <i>H. P. Lovecraft</i>	33
Ebenezer's Casket— <i>J. U. Giesy and Junius B. Smith</i>	36
Draconda— <i>John Martin Leahy</i>	41
The Hand— <i>H. Francis Caskey</i>	50
The Loved Dead— <i>C. M. Eddy, Jr.</i>	54
The Vow on Halloween— <i>Lyllian Huntley Harris</i>	58
Eyes— <i>Galen C. Colin</i>	59
The Man Who Thought He Was Dead— <i>Granville S. Hoss</i>	61
Called Back— <i>Dan W. Totheron</i>	65
The Sunken Land— <i>George W. Bayly</i>	69
The Dancing Partner— <i>Guy L. Helms</i>	74
The Last Entry— <i>Meredith Beyers</i>	76
The Purple Death— <i>Edith Lyle Ragsdale</i>	77
The Impostor— <i>Norman Springer</i>	82
Weird Crimes— <i>Seabury Quinn</i>	87
Just Bones— <i>Samuel Stewart Mims</i>	91
First Degree— <i>Robert Cosmo Harding</i>	96
The Latvian— <i>Herman Fetzer</i>	101
The Machine from Outside— <i>Don Howard</i>	106
Dr. Grant's Experiment— <i>H. A. Voureddin Addis</i>	111
Tea Leaves— <i>Henry S. Whitehead</i>	116
An Egyptian Lotus— <i>Mrs. Chetwood Smith</i>	121
Deep Sea Game— <i>Arthur J. Messier</i>	127
The Soul Mark— <i>H. C. Wire</i>	131
It— <i>E. M. Samson</i>	135
The Man Who Lived Next Door to Himself— <i>Frank Owen</i>	139
Mystery River— <i>Elwin J. Owens</i>	143
The God Yhuano— <i>Marjorie Darter</i>	145
The Cellar— <i>Paul L. Anderson</i>	147
In the Weird Light— <i>Edward Everett Wright and Ralph Howard Wright</i>	152
A Glimpse Beyond— <i>H. M. Hamilton</i>	164
Ask Houdini.....	167