

# WEIRD TALES *The Unique Magazine*

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# The Corpse on the Third Slab

**O**FFICER RYAN walked slowly along between two rows of cold, moist slabs on which reposed the chill, grisly remains of what had once been human beings.

He essayed a few bars of "River Shannon" in his rich, Killarney baritone, not loudly, yet with volume enough to drown the weird uncanny echoes that rang back from the walls and sloping ceiling of the morgue each time his heavy, hobnailed shoes came in contact with the floor.

Though he knew himself to be alone in the room, those echoes somehow gave him a feeling that he was being followed—a queer, creepy sensation that was far from agreeable. He stopped his humming abruptly. What was that? The sound of many voices mimicking his own? Suddenly he realized—and laughed. A myriad hollow cackles answered him.

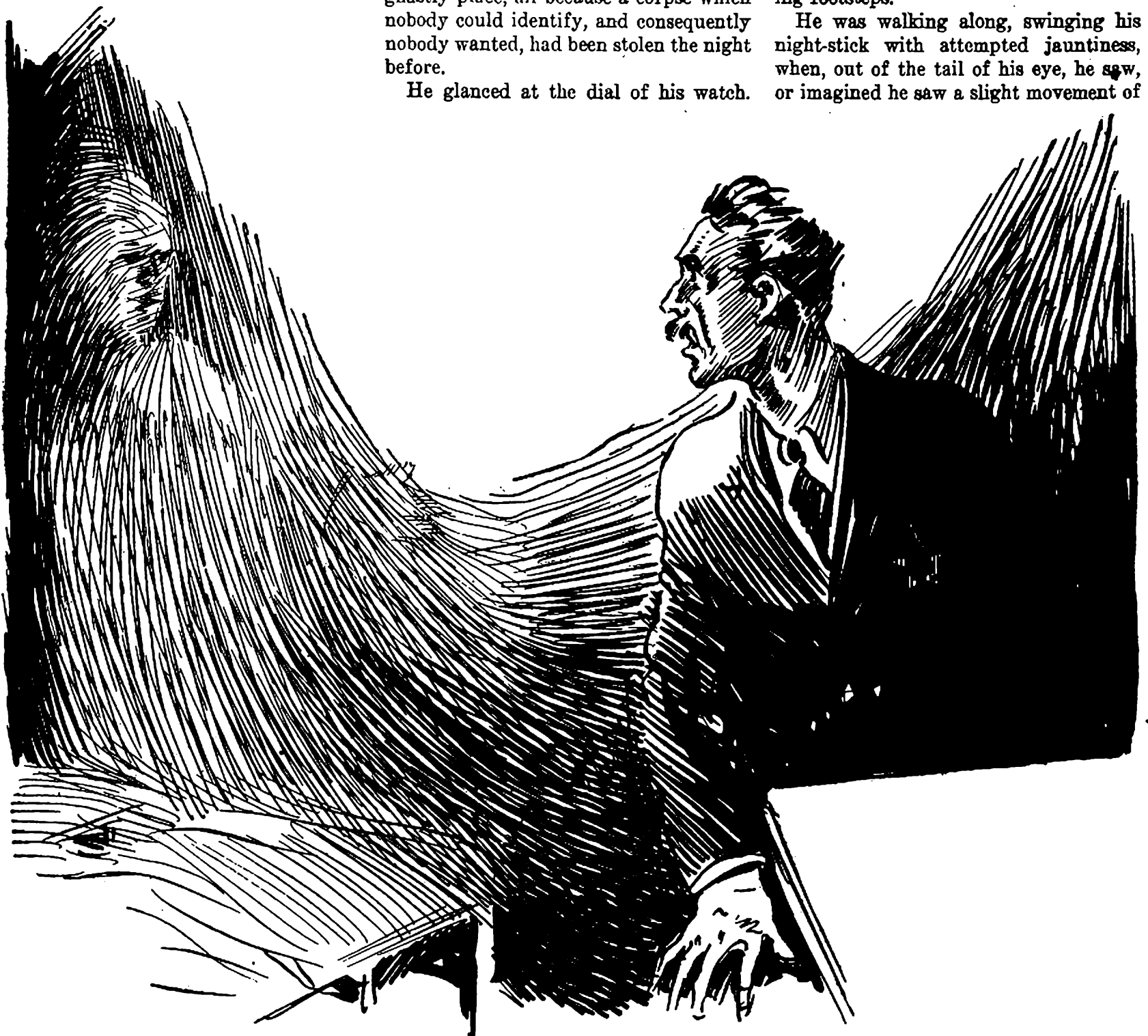
His face grew sober again, and he roundly cursed his superior who had detailed him for special duty in this ghastly place, all because a corpse which nobody could identify, and consequently nobody wanted, had been stolen the night before.

He glanced at the dial of his watch.

It was nearly one o'clock. Five long, dreary hours must pass before he could go home to the wife and kiddies.

An attendant had thoughtfully placed a chair from the office for him at the far end of the room. His instructions were to patrol the place every half hour. As it took him only five minutes to make the rounds, there was twenty-five minute intervals of rest twice in every hour. He hurried his pace a little as he neared the chair. Once seated thereon, he would at least be rid of the sound of those haunting footsteps.

He was walking along, swinging his night-stick with attempted jauntiness, when, out of the tail of his eye, he saw, or imagined he saw a slight movement of



the sheet covering the corpse at his right. He stopped petrified with amazement, and stared at the thing on the cold, gray slab, while a strange prickly feeling coursed the length of his dorsal vertebrae.

With forced bravado he stepped up beside the still figure and turned back the sheet. The corpse, which lay on the third slab from the end, was that of a middle aged man, gray haired, slightly bald, and dressed in the garb of a laborer. No doubt the face had not been unpleasant to look at in life but in death it was hardly a thing of beauty, with its glassy, staring eyes, sagging lower jaw, and protruding, blue-white tongue.

Ryan replaced the sheet with a shudder and hurried to his chair. The place certainly got on his nerves. He had known that it would when Chief Howell assigned him to it and, in observation of the old proverb, "Forewarned is forearmed," had made due preparation for the exigency. The preparation was very simple. He had poured some pale amber liquid from a large round bottle into a small, flat bottle. The flat bottle reposed snugly in his hip pocket.

The large, round bottle, a gallon of "moon," had been a present from a bootlegger friend.

"Don't be afraid to drink it like water, Ed," his friend had told him. "I know it's all right 'cause I made it myself. You won't find no slivers in that hooch."

Despite the admonition of his friend, the bottle had reposed in the Ryan basement for six months, untouched. Ryan was not an habitual drinker, but he believed in "kapin' a nip in the house for emergency."

He glanced slyly toward the office door, then extracted the bottle from his hip pocket, pulled the cork, and held it up to the light to admire its color and lucidity as a connoisseur admires rare old wine. With some dismay, he noticed that it was nearly two thirds empty, whereas the night was scarcely more than half gone. He must cut down the size of his drinks, or go without during the wee, small hours. He would cut down, too, after this one. Just this once he must have a man's size shot.

He needed it sorely. The staring eyes and lolling tongue of that corpse on the third slab had set his nerves on edge. Placing the bottle to his lips, he drank deeply, corked it, and returned it to his hip pocket with a sigh.

"Sure, and that Wop knows how to build booze," he muttered. "Goes down as smooth as oil, and it has a flavor like tin year old bottled in bond."

He sat in silence until his watch told him that it was time to make the rounds again, then rose reluctantly to perform his distasteful duty.

When he arrived opposite the third slab he resolutely looked straight ahead. Thus, he reasoned, if the thing should move he would not see it, and there would be no harm done. Ryan had overlooked the fact that he had a pair of perfectly good ears, and that they were in excellent working order. A slipping, sliding, soul-sickening sound from the direction of the third slab, acted as a forcible reminder.

With a gasp of horror, he fairly flew to the chair. He sat down weakly, mopped the cold perspiration from his forehead, and finished the contents of his bottle at one gurgling gulp.

Ryan had made up his mind not to look in the direction of that slab again, and when he made up his mind he was a hard man to change. With stubborn determination to carry out his plan, come what might, he pivoted his swivel chair a half turn and settled down to await the dreary passage of another twenty-five minutes.

"Now let the damn' thing turn over all it wants to, or do a toe dance, for all of me. Oi'll not give it the satisfaction of watchin its devilish capers," he resolved, half aloud.

That last drink had been a stiff one. In fact, it would have made four good husky drinks for as many hearty lumberjacks or longshoremen.

Ryan grew drowsy. Decorators had been at work in the morgue that day, white enameling the walls, and he told himself that the smell of the turpentine made him sleepy—that and the cursed dank, musty odor of the place itself. His head nodded until his chin rested on one of the gold buttons that adorned the front of his uniform.

Some time later he awoke with a start and looked at his watch. He looked again, rubbing his eyes to make sure that he was awake. Surely he had not slept more than ten minutes, yet the hands told him it was four-thirty.

He wondered what had awakened him. There had been a noise of some sort. He dimly remembered that much, but, try as he would, he could not recall the nature of the sound.

Suddenly, and with startling distinctness, the noise was repeated. It was the sharp click of a heavy shoe on the hard, concrete floor. Scarce had the hollow echoes died when he heard it again.

Someone was walking toward him with slow, dragging footsteps from the direction of the third slab!

RYAN was no coward. On the contrary, he had shown marked bravery in many encounters with desperate bandits and thugs of the underworld. Neither was he superstitious. He believed that when a man was dead he was gone; and that was that. His soul might go to purgatory, and thence to heaven or hell, but never return to earth. Yet, despite his inherent bravery and his firm theological convictions, he could not bring himself to swing his chair about and face the *thing* that was approaching.

In fact, he discovered, to his utter horror, that he was unable to move. He could not so much as lift his nerveless hands from the arms of the chair. Even breathing was difficult, as though great chains had been wound about his body, pinning him against the chair back.

Deliberately, painfully, those weird, echoing footfalls approached. The *thing* was almost upon him, yet he could not move nor utter a sound. An odd, misshapen shadow appeared on the floor in front of him. Slowly it crawled up the side of the wall, its grotesque outline gradually assuming human form.

Then the *thing* itself appeared. The invisible chains about Ryan's chest tightened, and icy fingers laid hold of his wildly beating heart and squeezed it until it pounded eccentrically, like an engine with cracked spark plugs, for he recognized the gaunt figure and grisly features of the corpse from the third slab!

It stood there before him, swaying slightly, then extended its gnarled left hand and steadied itself against the wall. As those glassy eyes stared into his, Ryan's palate seemed to shrivel and dry up. It rattled like a dead leaf in a gale with each intake of his breath.

Evidently the corpse was trying to converse with him, for its blue-white tongue and lips moved slightly. Presently it obtained some measure of control over them and spoke in a hoarse, husky whisper:

"G-good evening."

Ryan was too petrified with horror to reply.

The corpse looked at him curiously for a moment. Evidently it reached the decision that it had said the wrong thing. It tried again:

"G'morning, oshifer."

The policeman's tongue seemed glued to the roof of his mouth.

"Sha matter? Ya deaf and dumb?"

To his amazement, Ryan heard himself speaking. Anger at the other's insulting insinuation had loosed his tongue.

"No. Oi ain't deaf and dumb. Oi don't talk to the likes of yez, that's all. Now go back and lay down on yer slab and behave yerself, or oi'll kill yez deader than yez are already."

The corpse leered horribly. Then it laughed—a cackling, graveyard laugh that brought on a fit of coughing.

"Fooled you, too, did I?" it rasped. "Fooled 'em all. Fooled the old woman. Fooled the ash man. Fooled everybody."

"Go wan. You ain't foolin' nobody."

"Fooled 'em all, I tell you. She put chloroform in my hooch. Wanted to 'lope with the ash man. Don't care. Let her 'lope an' good riddance. Damned she-devil, anyhow. But I fooled 'em. They think I'm dead, but I ain't. No more dead 'n you are."

"The hell you ain't!" growled Ryan.

"Tell you I ain't," wheezed the corpse, testily. "Can't I walk? Can't I talk? Can't I do anything any live person can do?"

"Course yez can," agreed Ryan, who felt that he was beginning to see the light. "Anything can walk in a dream—even a corpse. Oi wance saw a kitchen table do the toddle with a grand piano in a nightmare."

"Who said anything about a dream? I'm not a dream and I can prove it."

"Yez'll have to show me," said Ryan.

"Oi'm from St. Louis."

"All right. If I was a dream you could see and hear me, but I couldn't see or hear you. Am I right or wrong?"

"Right."

"For instance, I wouldn't know whether you was a bull or a ballet dancer. I wouldn't be able to tell if you was smooth-faced or wore a set of Patsies."

"Sure yez wouldn't, and yez don't."

"Don't I, though. Get this. You're a big, overgrown, dishfaced, bull-necked cop, with a long, lippy carrot-colored set of soup-strainers that makes you look like a seasick walrus."

Ryan tried to rise and smite the presumptuous one but the invisible bonds held him. He gritted his teeth.

"Yez'll suffer for this, dream or no dream, corpse or no corpse," he groaned.

The corpse stared glassily, unmoved by his threat.

"You know," he continued, "I've been in better jails than this. No heat—no blankets—nothing. The beds are cold as ice and hard as rocks, and the sheets are thin as paper."

Ryan was astounded. Could it be possible that this corpse didn't know it was in the morgue?

The thing yawned, disclosing its ghastly, blue-white tongue.

"Ho, hum. Gettin' sleepy again. Guess I'll crawl back in the old sheet-rock bunk. G'night, bottle-nose."

This was too much for Ryan. His naturally florid countenance turned purple with anger as he watched the ghoulish figure stagger slowly toward the third slab. If he could only move! He concentrated his gaze on his little finger. Even it was incapable of motion, he thought. He tried to wiggle it, nevertheless, and lo, it wiggled. He essayed to lift his hand. It lifted. He was overcome with joy.

Rising carefully and noiselessly from the chair, he tiptoed stealthily after the corpse. First he thought to lay a heavy hand on its shoulder, but he could not bring himself to touch it. Revenge—sweet revenge was almost within his grasp, yet he dared not grasp it. Then came an inspiration. Shifting his bulk to his left foot, he poised his right and took careful aim at the tattered hip-pocket.

Somehow—perhaps because the pocket was moving, or mayhap because the amber liquid had befuddled his vision—he miscalculated the range. The heavy, hob-nailed boot traveled upward to where a solid target should have been but wasn't, and kept on traveling. It would probably have soared upward to the ceiling had it not been most intimately connected with Ryan's anatomy. As it was, it jerked his left foot from under him, the back of his head collided with the floor, and he caught a momentary glimpse of a hitherto unheard of, gloriously brilliant stellar constellation.

Then a curtain of dismal darkness descended around him, dragging him down to oblivion.

**R**YAN'S first approach to consciousness after that was a half-dreaming, half-waking state. He was under the impression that he was a corpse, lying on a cold, gray slab.

He put out his hand, then jerked it back hastily. He was lying on something cold and hard. This discovery quickly and thoroughly awakened him. He sat up and groaned, as a sharp pain shot through his head. Surely something had laid it wide open in the back. He felt it tenderly, and discovered a beautifully rounded contusion.

Suddenly he heard the hum of voices. One voice in particular sounded like that of Chief Howell.

He rose hastily, picked up his cap, and dusted his uniform. His watch told him it was six o'clock. He tried to recall how and why he was lying on the floor with a goose-egg on the back of his head. At length he remembered, and glanced

suspiciously toward the third slab. It was occupied, nor had the corpse apparently been disturbed, for it lay just as he had seen it when he passed at one o'clock, with the sheet draping its angular figure.

The sound of voices grew more distinct. Someone had opened the office door. Chief Howell was holding it open while two attendants entered, bearing a litter on which lay the body of a coarse, thick-featured woman. Her face was horribly mutilated and her hair and clothing were stained and matted with blood.

The attendants, casting about for a vacant slab, noted that the fourth was unoccupied, and conveyed the body thither.

Chief Howell called to someone who had just entered the office through the outer door.

"Come in, Coroner. I guess we've got this thing straightened out for you now."

Coroner Haynes entered, and the two walked over to the third slab. The chief drew a photograph from his pocket and, raising the sheet, compared it with the features of the corpse.

"It's him, all right," said Howell.

"Who?"

"This woman's husband, Frank Merlin. She killed him night before last—put chloroform in a bottle of moonshine whisky he had so she could elope with the ash man. As soon as he was dead she called up her affinity, who carried the body out to his cart, wrapped in gunny sacks, and hauled it to another part of the city where he dumped it in a dark alley.

"Last night she and her sweetheart got into a drunken argument and he almost cut her to ribbons. Neighbors, hearing the rumpus, called the officer on the beat. When he arrived the woman was dead and the man, beastly drunk, had to be clubbed almost into insensibility before he would submit to arrest. When he was brought in I doused him with cold water and sobered him up. After a severe grilling he confessed all."

Ryan listened to the story with bulging eyes. He had regarded his experience of the night before as a dream. What if, after all, it was a reality?

He started for the office, when something arrested his attention—the mark of a human hand on the newly enameled wall, as if someone had leaned against it. He recalled the attitude of the corpse as it stood by that wall the night before, and curiosity drew him irresistibly to the third slab.

The left hand was lying palm downward, and he turned it with difficulty, for rigor mortis had set in. Then he cried out in amazement at what he saw.

*The palm of the dead man was smeared with sticky, half-dried, white enamel!*