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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor



WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH



"The shovel had just touched wood when another owl-hoot convulsed the darkness."

The Laugh

By RICHARD H. HART

*That ghastly cacchination told the diamond-thief that his quest
was fruitless—a graveyard tale*

IT WAS well past eleven when Stan Wimberley cranked the dilapidated truck into life and sprang quickly to the cab, to adjust spark and gasoline levers before the wheezy motor should die. It would never do for his means of conveyance to fail him now. On this night he was going to reclaim the fortune which, he

told himself for the ten-thousandth time, was rightfully his.

For John Griffin was dead. Dead and buried. And Wimberley was as sure as anyone can be that Griffin had taken the Slidell diamond to the grave with him; the Slidell diamond that was as much Wimberley's as Griffin's.

It was curious about that diamond. Only Wimberley knew that Griffin had it. The latter had made a practise of carrying it in a chamois bag, greasy with age, about his neck. He had coated it with sealing-wax, and frequently displayed it, telling everyone that it was a pebble from a sacred mountain which his grandmother had given him. He wore it night and day, he said, to protect him from evil, and he often reiterated the statement that it must be buried with him. Otherwise, he said, bad luck would dog the footsteps of the person thwarting his desire.

People considered him a little touched—on that point, at least—which was just what Griffin desired. No one had ever made the slightest attempt to filch away the "holy relic."

No one, that is except Wimberley—and Griffin was always watching *him*. A thousand times Wimberley had pleaded with Griffin to sell the diamond and divide the proceeds. Griffin had always countered that this was "not safe, yet." Then he would add: "In a couple of years, maybe. It'll keep."

Oh, yes, it would keep. It had kept for twelve years when Griffin died, a dozen years to the day after Old Man Slidell had been killed in the wreck of his automobile. Wimberley and Griffin had been together when they stumbled upon the wreck. It was Wimberley who noticed that the four-carat diamond was in its accustomed place on the dead man's shirt-front, but it was Griffin who reached forth his hand and took it.

"No use for the heirs to fight over this,"

he'd said with a sly grin. "They'll have enough without it—and we know a couple of fellows it would do more good—hey, Wimberley?"

Wimberley's throat had constricted so he couldn't speak, but he had managed a nod and a grimace, unaware that the greed in his eyes had already answered for him.

Griffin had dropped the gem into his pocket and the two rascals had hurriedly gone away, leaving the wreck to be discovered by others.

It had happened that the next comers were a numerous party, with substantial men among them, so that no one was accused, or even suspected, of having taken the diamond. It was supposed that the stone had been lost at the time of the wreck, or that Old Man Slidell had previously hidden it so carefully that it could not be found.

WITHIN less than a week after their illegal acquisition, Wimberley was suggesting to Griffin that they turn the diamond into money and divide the proceeds.

"It'll be safe enough," he argued. "Why, nobody's even looking for the thing. We can go down to New Orleans and get a good price for it there—not what it's worth, of course, but something near it; enough to put us both on Easy Street, with good liquor and good-looking frails a-plenty, and no work or worry."

"Put us in the hoosegow, you mean—you sap," Griffin had retorted. "You poor boob, don't you know that every stone as big as this one has a history, and that anyone with enough money to buy it would recognize it? Wait until this business cools off!"

That sort of logic had sufficed for a couple of months, for Wimberley was not an utter fool. Then, to his dismay, he found his confederate's attitude changing. Griffin no longer bothered to be logical. He held the whip-hand now, and knew it.

It was too late for Wimberley to accuse him of the theft, and the former's only chance of profiting by their joint crime lay in securing Griffin's acquiescence to selling the diamond.

There were times when Wimberley thought that Griffin derived a malicious pleasure from tantalizing him; at others, he was quite sure that Griffin had fallen in love with the bauble, or with the power and potential affluence which it embodied, and that he had no intention of letting go of it.

What made the situation so galling was that Griffin was in comfortable circumstances, never having to worry about his living, whereas Wimberley had to toil for his daily bread and never had two good suits of clothes at the same time in his life.

And all along Griffin displayed a diabolical cleverness. Beyond his refusal to set a date for disposing of the stone, he had never crossed Wimberley. He never snubbed him, publicly or otherwise, and at least once a week he invited him to dinner. After the meal was over and the two men were alone, he would become loquacious.

"You're a good fellow, Wimberley," he would say smilingly, "but you're lacking in patience—in *finesse*. You want to rush things too much. People like you are their own worst enemies."

Wimberley would realize savagely that his guns had been spiked before he could unlimber them; his half-hearted attempts to convince Griffin that they ought to sell the diamond were foredoomed to fail, and before he knew it the conversation would have drifted to other topics. He had at last become almost resigned to this will-o'-the-wispish sort of warfare in which he never won and Griffin never lost.

Then, after the affair had been dragging on so long that neither man could say how many years it had been without counting back, Wimberley was called out of town by the last illness of a relative. The rela-

tive had left him nothing, and Wimberley had returned after two weeks to find Griffin also dead and in his grave.

Nothing was being said about the diamond (or "sacred pebble"), and Wimberley was too craven-clever to make inquiries about it; he'd never been one to awaken sleeping dogs. For the same reason, he decided against visiting the cemetery; there was no use in anything which might be inconveniently remembered later if something happened to go wrong.

It was necessary, of course, to act quickly. Griffin had been buried but one day, no rain had since fallen, and the earth of his grave was still fresh—but it would not be fresh next week. Any attempt to disturb it then would be noticed, an investigation might be made, inquiries begun. No; it would be folly to wait. So Wimberley had decided that he would act that very night.

All of these things passed through his mind again as his ancient little truck chugged and wheezed the three miles to the cemetery where he knew Griffin had been buried. But such things belonged to the past, now, he told himself exultantly. When he'd got his hands on the Slidell diamond he'd leave at once for New Orleans. Then: money, liquor, women, power. Ah-h-h! He was glad now that Griffin had insisted on waiting. Now it was *all his!*

THE young moon had set an hour earlier, but Wimberley switched off the primitive magneto-lights a half-mile before he reached the graveyard. With a fortune at stake, there was no excuse for taking chances, especially since he knew every rut in the road. He could almost have driven it blindfolded. An owl hooted somewhere as he turned into the gateless entrance, and Wimberley snickered.

"'Who' is right!" he muttered. "Even if they found the grave had been opened, they'd never know *who* had done it. That's

something nobody'll ever know but Uncle Stanley!"

After a few minutes of patient searching, he located the grave. His nostrils had helped to find the fresh-turned earth. A tiny flashlamp, carefully masked, enabled him to read the mortician's tag and establish the identification beyond question.

Quickly, silently, he took a long-handled shovel from the truck and fell to work. The mound had been sodded, and this pleased him. When the grave had been refilled and the turf redisposed, little chance of detection would remain. But he could not bring himself to relish the enterprise, and he speeded up his labors in order to finish it as soon as possible.

The shovel had just touched wood when another owl-hoot convulsed the darkness. Even though he recognized it almost at once, Wimberley could not prevent the tool's slipping from his perspiring fingers, and he was uncomfortably aware of the pit of his stomach.

A sudden loathing for his task gripped him for a moment, but the thought of the Slidell diamond nerved him to resume. That was something worth fighting for—against man, ghost, or Father of Evil in person! Again he plied the shovel, but with more speed and less caution than before. Telltale clods were being scattered about the grave, but Wimberley was powerless to slow his pace; he was afraid that if he didn't finish the task soon he would find himself leaping into his truck and driving away at top speed.

There was no reason for this mad haste, he told himself, but panic seldom yields to reason, and the shovel flew faster and faster. The top of the coffin-box was clear at last, and Wimberley used the shovel as a crowbar to pry off its boards. He was making a steadily increasing amount of noise, but caution was a thing of the past. What he had to do must be done, and the sooner it was done the better!

It was a titan's task to lift the coffin from box and grave, but Wimberley accomplished it at the cost of barked knuckles and wrenched muscles. He'd be full of aches and pains tomorrow, he reflected as he balanced the casket upon the fresh mound of soil, but there would be compensations. Yes, there'd be compensations!

His momentary pause allowed the silence to close in about him again, and he realized suddenly that he was alone in the graveyard and that the hour was midnight. With a shudder he drew a screwdriver from his pocket and ran exploring fingers along the coffin.

What was that?

Wimberley tried to grin in the darkness. He'd almost have sworn he heard a laugh, somewhere beyond his truck. Not a very noisy laugh, but almost as if someone were smiling out loud, he thought. For a moment he imagined he could see a pair of eyes glittering at him with demoniac mirth.

He strained his vision against the darkness and finally became convinced that there was nothing to see. As for the laugh, that had probably been a sound from his cooling motor, distorted by his nervousness. He shrugged his shoulders, but the shrug became a shudder, and his fingers trembled as he essayed to remove the first screw from its varnished bed.

After a false start or two, he managed to get the screw out; then he began to search for the second one. At this rate, he reflected angrily, he wouldn't get the lid off for an hour. And an hour spent in these surroundings was an unconscionable period. Perhaps it would be better—

There it was again!

This time the shock was greater, because his nerves were already on edge. The screwdriver slipped from his fingers, and as he crouched down to retrieve it he tried to convince himself that it was really cooling metal which he had heard. But the reassuring belief would not crystallize; there

was an uneasy residuum of doubt that refused to be gone. If a cooling motor usually made such a peculiarly derisive noise, he should have noticed it before. Frantic searching of his memory brought forth no such comforting recollection.

THERE were other things, of course, which could have produced strange noises: animals and growing shrubs, for instance. But the effort to reconcile the hideous sound with these sources was futile—and there was no use in trying to fool himself so. It was possible, though, that he had only imagined it. Overstrained nerves do strange things, sometimes.

"Just my imagination, of course," he said determinedly to himself as he applied his recovered screwdriver again to its task. "If I think I hear it again, I'll just put it down to nerves and go ahead as if nothing had——"

"Heh, heh; heh-heh."

Phantom hair erected itself along Wimberley's spine and a spasmodic shudder flung the screwdriver from his hand into the darkness. That was exactly how John Griffin had always laughed!

Against his will, against every atom of mental force that he could still command, the thought that Griffin was deriding him hammered upon Wimberley's brain and clamored for acceptance.

"No! No!" he protested desperately. "If I believe *that* I'll have gone mad! I must stay sane. I must be rational. I must find a logical explanation for that—that——"

Suddenly the explanation came. He'd heard a laugh, true. But it wasn't Griffin's laugh. Some living person was in the graveyard, spying on him; spying on him and unable wholly to refrain from laughter at his pitiful efforts at secrecy!

Maddening as the explanation was, it was preferable to the alternative, and Wimberley hugged it to himself avidly.

Damn spying fools and all their kindred!

He was only trying to reclaim what was rightfully his, and some cheeky busybody was eavesdropping on him—getting ready to spoil everything. It wasn't right!

But—and the thought revived him—probably the spy hadn't yet identified him; there might still be time to escape with a whole skin. Yes, and with the Slidell diamond, too!

For this he could thank those who had located the cemetery upon a hillside. And he could credit his own account for having stopped his truck just below the grave. It was no trick at all to slide the coffin from its resting-place upon the mound of earth into the truck-bed. Only a moment longer was needed to leap into the cab and release the brake. At once gravity seized upon the laden vehicle and propelled it toward the entranceway with momentarily increasing speed. It was barely outside when Wimberley threw it into high gear and switched on the ignition. Still lightless, the truck hurtled forward into the night.

A dozen times in the next quarter-hour Wimberley escaped death by less than the breadth of a hair. Familiar as the road was, only his frenzied alertness saved him from a smash-up. Once it was the dark loom of poplars against the scarcely less dark vault above that kept him from careening into a hillside. At another spot a whiff of damp air from a brook prevented his running headlong into a ditch.

When he could stand the strain no longer, he switched on the headlights, then tramped upon the accelerator. The indicator of the speedometer spun crazily, then inched steadily forward. Thirty-five, forty, forty-five, fifty miles per hour it showed as the old high-pressure tires bounced from rut to rut and threatened to leave their rims with every bounce. Fence-posts and telegraph poles merged into an almost solid wall. The badly-clogged radiator began to steam. A smell of scorched paint came

up from the floor-boards, and through a crack between them the exhaust-pipe glowed redly.

WIMBERLEY had put a score of miles behind him when a sudden clangorous bedlam from the motor told him that its bearings had been pushed beyond their limit, and that the wild ride was over. With the last of its momentum, he allowed the truck to find a resting-place behind a clump of bushes that would partly screen it from the road.

Upon the return of silence there came a recrudescence of the old unease. To fight it off, Wimberley fell to work on the coffin again. He used the flashlamp, this time, regardless of the need for secrecy. His nerves, he was now willing to admit, were not equal to completing the task in the dark. Hard enough to do it with the little lamp! Only the thought of the Slidell diamond kept him at it.

When the lid of the coffin came off, Wimberley found his gaze drawn irresistibly to the face of the corpse. Decomposition had not yet set in, but the corners of his lips were drawn upward, as if in a faintly derisive grin. And, although the lids were down, the dim light produced the illusion of a mocking stare. Wimberley gritted his teeth and probed for the chamois bag. Yes, here it was, greasier and shabbier than ever, but promisingly heavy.

The cord which secured it was a stout one, and when the eager Wimberley pulled at it he found the corpse rising to follow in menacing fashion. Horror lent him strength for a convulsive jerk that broke the cord and sent him tumbling backward to the ground. He bounded up again, ready to flee, but Griffin's corpse had settled back into the coffin, out of sight.

For several minutes Wimberley stood stock-still, breathing heavily, eyes riveted on the casket. Had anything appeared above its edge, he would have shrieked

and fled headlong. But nothing appeared.

Finally he was able to remember the bag in his hand. Now, now he was going to see the Slidell diamond again—after all these years. And it was all his!

The thought galvanized him into action. Stooping over, he set the flashlamp upon the running-board of the truck; then he shook out the contents of the chamois bag. The familiar dull-red hue of sealing-wax met his feverish gaze. At last!

He laid the cherished object upon the running-board and rapped it sharply with the handle of his penknife. The shell of sealing-wax cracked and fell apart, revealing the stone within.

It was a very ordinary-looking pebble.

Even as one part of Wimberley's brain was numbed by the shock, another portion was incandescent with understanding. That operation of Griffin's! The unprofessional-seeming surgeon from New Orleans. The speedy recovery. The strange, the incomprehensible, reluctance of Griffin to discuss the operation. All of it was clear as crystal in one devastating moment.

It was a joke on Wimberley. It was a huge joke, a cataclysmic joke. It was such a joke as Death himself must laugh at. And the cream of the jest was that it had been perpetrated so long ago. Ten years it had been since Griffin had called in the big-city fence to play the part of a surgeon, and to dicker for the Slidell diamond behind the smoke-screen of a mythical operation. For ten long years, for a decade of fearful hope and bitter despair on the part of Wimberley, Griffin had kept the secret and held his laughter. But now that the climax was reached even rigor mortis could not restrain his mirth!

From within the coffin came a soft murmur of sound. It could have been the corpse settling further into its satin bed, but Wimberley was certain that John Griffin was indulging in a last, derisive chuckle.