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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Man Who Returned

By EDMOND HAMILTON

The story of a man who was laid away in his coffin, and the unexpected reception he got when he returned to his friends



"I'm so happy, dear," she answered, turning toward him.

JOHAN WOODFORD in his first moments of returning consciousness was not aware that he was lying in his coffin. He had only a dull knowledge that he lay in utter darkness and that there was a close, heavy quality in the air he breathed. He felt very weak and had only a dim curiosity as to where he was and how he had come there.

He knew that he was not lying in his bedroom at home, for the darkness there was never so complete as this. Home? That memory brought others to John Woodford's dulled brain and he recalled his wife now, and his son. He remembered too that he had been ill at home, very ill. And that was all that he could remember.

What was this place to which he had been brought? Why was the darkness so complete and the silence so unbroken, and why was there no one near him? He was a sick man, and they should have given him better care than this. He lay with a dull irritation at this treatment growing in his mind.

Then he became aware that breathing was beginning to hurt his lungs, that the air seemed warm and foul. Why did not someone open a window? His irritation grew to such a point that it spurred his muscles into action. He put out his right hand to reach for a bell or a light-button.

His hand moved slowly only a few inches to the side and then was stopped by an unyielding barrier. His fingers feebly examined it. It seemed a solid wall of wood or metal faced with smooth satin. It extended all along his right side, and when he weakly moved his other arm he found a similar wall on that side too.

His irritation gave way to mystification. Why in the world had they put him, a sick man, into this narrow place? Why, his shoulders rubbed against the sides on either side. He would soon know the reason for it, he told himself. He raised up to give utterance to a call that would bring those in attendance on him.

To his utter amazement his head bumped against a similar silk-lined wall directly above his face. He raised his arms in the darkness and discovered with growing astonishment that this wall or ceiling extended above him from head to foot, like those on either side. He lay upon a similar silk-padded surface. Why in the name of all that was holy had they put him into a silk-lined box like this?

Woodford's brain was puzzling this when a minor irritation made itself felt. His collar was hurting him. It was a high, stiff collar and it was pressing into the

flesh of his neck. But this again was mystery—that he should be wearing a stiff collar. Why had they dressed a sick man in formal clothes and put him into this box?

Suddenly John Woodford shrieked, and the echoes of his scream reverberated around his ears like hideous, demonic laughter. He suddenly knew the answer to it all. He was not a sick man any more at all. He was a dead man! Or at least they had thought him dead and had put him into this coffin and closed it down! He was buried alive!

The fears of his lifetime had come true; his secret, dark forebodings were hideously realized. From earliest childhood he had feared this very horror, for he had known himself subject to cataleptic sleeps hardly to be distinguished from death. He had had nightmares of premature burial. Even after the proneness to the cataleptic condition seemed to have left him, his fears had clung to him.

He had never told his wife or son of his fears, but they had persisted. They had inspired him to exact a promise that he would not be embalmed when buried, and would be interred in his private vault instead of in the earth. He had thought that in case he were not really dead these provisions might save his life, but now he realized that they only laid him open to the horrible fate he had dreaded. He knew with terrible certainty that he lay now in his coffin in the stone vault in the quiet cemetery. His screams could not be heard outside the vault, probably not even outside the coffin. As long as he had lain in cataleptic sleep he had not breathed, but now that he was awake and breathing, the air in the coffin was rapidly being exhausted and he was doomed to perish of suffocation.

John Woodford went temporarily mad. He screamed with fear-choked throat, and

as he shrieked he clawed with hands and feet at the unyielding satin-covered surfaces around and above him. He beat upward as best he could upon the coffin's lid with his clenched fists, but the heavy fastenings held firm.

He yelled until his throat was too swollen to give utterance to further sound. He clawed at the top until he broke his nails against the metal behind the silk padding. He raised his head and beat against the top with it until he fell back half-stunned.

He lay exhausted for moments, unable to make further efforts. In his brain marched a hideous pageant of horrors. The air seemed much closer and hotter now, seemed to burn his lungs with each breath he inhaled. With sudden return of his frenzy he shrieked and shrieked again.

This would not do. He was in a horrible situation but he must do the best he could not to give way to the horror. He had not many minutes left and he must use them in the most rational way possible to try to escape his terrible prison.

With this resolution a little calm came to him and he began to test his powers of movement. He clenched his fists again and hammered upward. But this did no good. His arms were jammed so close against his body by the coffin's narrowness that he could not strike a strong blow, nor had he any leverage to push strongly upward.

What about his feet? Feverishly he tried them, but found his kicks upward even less powerful. He thought of hunching up his knees and thus bursting up the lid, but found that he could not raise his knees high enough, and that when he pressed upward with them against the lid his feet simply slid away on the smooth silk of the coffin's bottom.

Now the breaths he drew seared his

lungs and nostrils and his brain seemed on fire. He knew his strength was waning and that before long he would lose consciousness. He must do whatever he could swiftly. He felt the soft silk about him and the dreadful irony of it came home to him—he had been placed so lovingly in this death-trap!

He tried to turn on his side, for he thought now that he might use his shoulders to heave up against the lid. But turning was not easy in the cramped coffin and had to be accomplished by a myriad little hitching movements, an infinitely slow and painful process.

JOHN WOODFORD hitched and squirmed desperately until he lay on his left side. He found then that his right shoulder touched the lid above. He braced his left shoulder on the coffin's bottom and heaved upward with all his strength. There was no result: the lid seemed as immovable as ever.

He heaved again, despair fast filling his heart. He knew that very soon he would give way and shriek and claw. There was already a ringing in his ears. He had not many minutes left. With the utter frenzy of despair he heaved upward again with his shoulder.

This time there was a grating sound of something giving above. The sound was like the wild peal of thousands of bells of hope to John Woodford's ears. He heaved quickly again and again at the lid. Paying no attention to the bruising of his shoulder, he pressed upward with every ounce of his strength.

There was another grating sound, then a snap of metal fastenings breaking, and as he shoved upward with convulsive effort the heavy metal lid swung up and over and struck the stone wall with a deep clang. A flood of cold air struck him. He struggled up over the coffin's side,

dropped a few feet to a stone floor, and lay in a huddled mass.

It was minutes before he had mastered himself and summoned enough strength to stand up. He stood inside a little vault that held no coffin but his own. Its interior was in darkness save for a dim shaft of starlight that came through a tiny window high up in one wall.

John Woodford stumbled to the vault's heavy iron doors and fumbled at their lock. He had an uncontrollable horror of this place that had almost been the scene of his perishing. The coffin there on the shelf with its lid leaning against the stone wall seemed gaping for him with its dark, cavernous mouth.

He worked frantically at the lock. What if he were not able to escape from the vault? But the heavy lock was easily manipulated on the inside, he found. He managed to turn its tumbler and shoot its bar and then the heavy iron doors swung open. John Woodford stepped eagerly out into the night.

He stopped on the vault's threshold, closing the doors behind him and then looking forth with inexpressible emotions. The cemetery lay in the starlight before him as a dim, ghostly city of looming monuments and vaults. Little sheets of ice glinted here and there in the dim light, and the air was biting in its cold. Outside the cemetery's low wall blinked the lights of the surrounding city.

Woodford started eagerly across the cemetery, unheeding of the cold. Somewhere across the lights of the city was his home, his wife, and somewhere his son—thinking him dead, mourning him. How glad they would be when he came back to them, alive! His heart expanded as he pictured their amazement and their joy at his return.

He came to the low stone wall of the cemetery and clambered quickly over it.

It was apparently well after midnight, for the cars and pedestrians in sight in this suburban section were few.

Woodford hurried along the street. He passed people who looked at him in surprise, and only after some time did he realize the oddness of his appearance. A middle-aged man clad in a formal suit and lacking hat and overcoat was an odd person to meet on a suburban street on a winter midnight.

But he paid small attention to their stares. He did turn up the collar of his frock coat to keep out the cold. But he hardly felt the frigid air in the emotions that filled him. He wanted to get home, to get back to Helen, to witness her stupefaction and dawning joy when she saw him returned from the dead, living.

A STREET-CAR came clanging along and John Woodford stepped quickly out to board it, but almost as quickly stepped back. He had mechanically thrust his hand into his pocket and found it quite empty. That was to be expected, of course. They didn't put money in a dead man's clothes. No matter, he would soon be there on foot.

As he reached the section in which his home was located, he glanced in a store-window in passing and saw on a tear-sheet calendar a big black date that made him gasp. It was a date ten days later than the one he last remembered. He had been buried in the vault for more than a week!

More than a week in that coffin! It seemed incredible, terrible. But that did not matter now, he told himself. It would only make the joy of his wife and son the greater when they found he was alive. To Woodford himself it seemed as though he were returning from a journey rather than from the dead.

Returned from the dead! As he has-

toned along the tree-bordered street on which his home was located, he almost laughed aloud as he thought of how amazed some of his friends would be when they met him. They would think him a ghost or a walking corpse, would perhaps shrink in terror from him at first.

But that thought brought another: he must not walk in on Helen too abruptly. The husband she had buried ten days ago must not appear too suddenly or the shock might easily kill her. He must contrive somehow to soften the shock of his appearance, must make sure that he did not startle her too much.

With this resolve in mind, when he reached his big house set well back from the street, Woodford turned aside through the grounds instead of approaching the front entrance. He saw windows lighted in the library of the house and he went toward them. He would see who was there, would try to break the news of his return gently to Helen.

He silently climbed onto the terrace outside the library windows and approached the tall casements. He peered in.

Through the silken curtains inside he could clearly see the room's soft-lit interior, cozy with the shelves of his books and with the lamps and fireplace.

Helen, his wife, sat on a sofa with her back partly toward the window. Beside her sat a man that Woodford recognized as one of their closest friends, Curtis Dawes.

Sight of Dawes gave Woodford an idea. He would get Dawes outside in some way and have him break the news of his return to Helen. His heart was pounding at sight of his wife.

Then Curtis Dawes spoke, his words dimly audible to Woodford outside the window. "Happy, Helen?" he was asking.

"So happy, dear," she answered, turning toward him.

Out in the darkness Woodford stared in perplexed wonder. How could she be happy when she thought her husband dead and buried?

He heard Curtis Dawes speaking again. "It was a long time," the man was saying. "Those years that I waited, Helen."

She laid her hand tenderly on his. "I know, and you never said a word. I respected so your loyalty to John."

She looked into the fire musingly. "John was a good husband, Curt. He really loved me and I never let him guess that I didn't love him, that it was you, his friend, I loved. But when he died I couldn't feel grief. I felt regret for his sake, of course, but underneath it was the consciousness that at last you and I were free to love each other."

Dawes' arm went tenderly around her shoulder. "Darling, you don't regret that I talked you into marrying me right away? You don't care that people may be talking about us?"

"I don't care for anything but you," she told him. "John was dead, young Jack has his own home and wife, and there was no reason in the world why we should not marry. I'm glad that we did."

In the darkness outside the window a stunned, dazed John Woodford saw her lift an illumined face toward the man's.

"I'm proud to be your wife at last, dear, no matter what anyone may say about us," he heard,

WOODFORD drew slowly back from the window. He paused in the darkness under the trees, his mind shaken, torn.

So *this* was his homecoming from the tomb? This was the joy he had anticipated in Helen when he returned?

It couldn't be the truth! His ears had deceived him—Helen could not be the wife of Curtis Dawes! Yet part of his

mind told him remorselessly that it was true.

He had always sensed that Helen's feeling for him was not as strong as his for her. But that she had loved Dawes he had never dreamed. Yet now he remembered Dawes' frequent visits, the odd silences between him and Helen. He remembered a thousand trifles that spoke of the love which these two had cherished for each other.

What was he, John Woodford, to do? Walk in upon them and tell them that they had been premature in counting him dead, that he had come back to claim his position in life and his wife again?

He couldn't do it! If Helen during those years had wavered in the least in her loyalty to him, he would have had less compunction. But in the face of those years of silent, uncomplaining life with him, he couldn't now reappear to her and blast her new-found happiness and blacken her name.

Woodford laughed a little, bitterly. He was then to be an Enoch Arden from the tomb. A strange rôle, surely, yet it was the only one open to him.

What was he to do? He couldn't let Helen know now that he was alive, couldn't return to the home that had been his. Yet he must go somewhere. Where?

With a sudden leap of the heart he thought of Jack, his son. He could at least go to Jack, let his son know that he was living. Jack at least would be overjoyed to see him, and would keep the fact of his return secret from his mother.

John Woodford, with that thought rekindling a little his numbed feelings, started back through the trees toward the street. Where he had approached the house but minutes before with eager steps, he stole away now like a thief fearful of being observed.

He reached the street and started

across the blocks toward the cottage of his son. Few were abroad, for the cold seemed increasing and it was well past midnight. Woodford mechanically rubbed his stiffened hands as he hurried along.

He came to his son's neat little white cottage, and felt relief as he saw lights from its lower windows also. He had feared that no one would be up. He crossed the frozen lawn to the lighted windows, intent on seeing if Jack were there and if he were alone.

He peered in, as he had done at his own home. Jack was sitting at a little desk and his young wife was perched on the arm of his chair and was listening as he explained something to her from a sheet of writing on the desk.

John Woodford, pressing his face against the cold window-pane, could hear Jack's words.

"You see, Dorothy, we can just make it by adding our savings to Dad's insurance money," Jack was saying.

"Oh, Jack!" cried Dorothy happily. "And it's what you've wanted so long, a little business of your own!"

Jack nodded. "It won't be very big to start with, but I'll make it grow, all right. This is the chance I've been hoping for and I'm sure going to make the most of it.

"Of course," he said, his face sobering a little, "it's too bad about Dad going like that. But seeing that he *did* die, the insurance money solves our problems of getting started. Now you take the overhead——" he said, and began unreeling a string of figures to the intent Dorothy.

JOHN WOODFORD drew slowly back from the window. He felt more dazed and bewildered than ever. He had forgotten the insurance he had carried, which he had intended to give Jack his start. But of course, he saw now, it had

been paid over when he was believed dead.

He was not dead, but living. Yet if he let Jack know that, it meant the end of his son's long-desired opportunity. Jack would have to return the insurance money to the company, wrecking his dreamed-of chance. How could he let him know, then?

He, John Woodford, had already decided that he must remain dead to his wife and therefore to the world. He might as well remain so to his son, also. It was for the best. John Woodford melted away from the cottage into the darkness.

When he reached the street he stood in indecision. A freezing wind had begun to blow, and he felt very cold without an overcoat. Mechanically he turned his coat-collar closer around his neck.

He tried to think what he must do. Neither Helen nor Jack must know that he was living, and that meant that no one in the city must know. He must get out of the town to some other place, take up life under some other name.

But he would need help, money, to do that. Where was he to get them? Barred as he was from calling on his wife or son, to whom could he turn for help without letting his return become generally known?

Howard Norse! The name came at once to Woodford's lips. Norse had been his employer, head of the firm where Woodford had held a position for many years. Woodford had been one of his oldest employees. Howard Norse would help him to get a position somewhere else, and would keep his reappearance secret.

He knew where Norse's residence was, several miles out in the country. But he couldn't walk that far, and he had no

taxi or trolley-fare. He would have to telephone Norse.

WOODFORD walked back toward the city's central section, head bent against the piercing cold wind. He succeeded in finding an all-night lunchroom whose proprietor allowed him to use the telephone. With cold-stiffened fingers he dialed Norse's number.

Howard Norse's sleepy voice soon came over the wire. "Mr. Norse, this is Woodford—John Woodford," he said quickly.

There was an incredulous exclamation from Howard Norse. "You're crazy! John Woodford's been dead and buried for a couple of weeks!"

"No, I tell you it's John Woodford!" insisted Woodford. "I'm not dead at all, I'm as living as you are! If you'll come into town for me you'll see for yourself."

"I'm not likely to drive to town at two in the morning to look at a maniac," Norse replied acidly. "Whatever your game is, you're wasting your time on me."

"But you've got to help me!" Woodford cried. "I've got to have money, a chance to get out of the city without anyone knowing. I gave your firm my services for years and now you've got to give me help!"

"Listen to me, whoever you are," snapped Norse over the wire. "I was bothered long enough with John Woodford when he was living—he was so inefficient we'd have kicked him out long ago if we hadn't been sorry for him. But now that he's dead, you needn't think you can bother me in his name. Good-night!"

The receiver clicked in Woodford's unbelieving ear.

He stared at the instrument. So *that* was what they had really thought of him

at the firm—there where he had always thought himself one of the most highly valued of employees!

But there must be someone upon whom he could call for help; someone he could convince that John Woodford was still living; someone who would be glad to think that he might be living.

What about Willis Grann? Grann had been his closest friend next to Curtis Dawes. He had lent money more than once to Woodford in the past, and certainly should be willing to do so now.

Hastily Woodford called Grann's number. This time he was more careful in his approach, when he heard the other's voice.

"Willis, I've got something to tell you that may sound incredible, but you've got to believe, do you hear?" he said.

"Who is this and what in the world are you talking about?" demanded Grann's startled voice.

"Willis, this is John Woodford. Do you hear, John Woodford! Everyone thinks I'm dead but I'm not, and I've got to see you."

"What?" cried the other's voice over the telephone. "Why, you must be drunk. I saw Woodford lying in his coffin myself, so I know he's dead."

"I tell you, it's not so, I'm not dead!" Woodford almost screamed. "I've got to get some money, though, to get away from here and you must lend it to me! You always lent it to me before, and I need it now worse than ever I did. I've got to get away!"

"So that's it!" said Willis Grann. "Because I used to help Woodford out you think you can get money from me by just calling me up and pretending that you're he. Why, Woodford himself was the biggest pest in the world with his constant borrowings. I felt almost relieved when he died. And now you try to make

me believe that he's come back from the dead to pester me again!"

"But he never died—I'm John Woodford really——" Woodford protested vainly.

"Sorry, old top," returned Grann's mocking voice. "Next time pick a living person to impersonate, not a dead one."

He hung up. John Woodford slowly replaced the receiver and made his way out to the street.

THE wind was blowing harder and now was bringing with it clouds of fine snow that stung against his face like sand. He shivered as he stumbled along the streets of dark shops, his body freezing as his mind was frozen.

There was no one from whom he could get help, he saw. His paramount necessity was still to get out of the city, and to do that he must rely on himself.

The icy blasts of the snow-laden wind penetrated through his thin coat. His hands were shaking with the cold.

A sign caught Woodford's eye, the illuminated beacon of a relief lodging-house. At once he made his way toward it. He could at least sleep there tonight, get started from the city in the morning.

The shabby men dozing inside in chairs looked queerly at him as he entered. So did the young clerk to whom he made his way.

"I'd—I'd like to stay here tonight," he said to the clerk.

The clerk stared. "Are you trying to kid me?"

Woodford shook his head. "No, I'm penniless and it's cold outside. I've got to stay somewhere."

The clerk smiled disdainfully. "Listen, fellow, no one with duds like yours is that hard up. Scram before I call a cop."

Woodford looked down at his clothes, his frock coat and stiff white shirt and

gleaming patent-leather shoes, and understood.

He said desperately to the clerk, "But these clothes don't mean anything. I tell you, I haven't a penny!"

"Will you beat it before I have you thrown out of here?" the clerk demanded.

Woodford backed toward the door. He went outside again into the cold. The wind had increased and more snow was falling. The front of Woodford's coat was soon covered with it as he pushed along.

It came to him as a queer joke that the splendor of his funeral clothes should keep him from getting help now. He couldn't even beg a passer-by for a dime. Who would give to a panhandler in formal clothes?

Woodford felt his body quivering and his teeth chattering from sheer cold. If he could only get out of the blast of the icy wind! His eyes sought desperately along the street for a hallway where he might shelter himself.

He found a deep doorway and crouched down inside it, out of the wind and driving snow. But hardly had he done so when a heavy step paused in front of him and a nightstick rapped his feet smartly. An authoritative voice ordered him to get up and go home.

Woodford did not try to explain to the policeman that he was not a drunken citizen fallen by the way. He got wearily to his feet and moved on along the street, unable to see more than a few feet ahead for the whirl of snow.

The snow on which he was walking penetrated the thin shoes he wore, and his feet were soon even colder than the rest of his body. He walked with slow, dragging steps, head bent against the storm of white.

He was dully aware that the dark shops beside him had given way to a low stone

wall. With a sudden start he recognized it as the wall of the cemetery which he had left but hours before, the cemetery from a vault in which he had escaped.

The vault! Why hadn't he thought of it before? he asked himself. The vault would be a shelter from the freezing wind and snow. He could stay there for the night without anyone objecting.

He paused, feeling for a moment a little renewal of his former terrors. Did he dare go back into that place from which he had struggled to escape? Then an extra-strong blast of icy air struck him and decided him—the vault would be shelter and that was what his frozen body craved more than anything else.

Stiffly he climbed over the low stone wall and made his way through the cemetery's whitened monuments and vaults toward the one from which he had escaped. The driving snow covered his tracks almost as he made them, as he trudged toward the vault.

He reached it and tried its iron doors anxiously. Suppose he had locked them when he left! But to his relief they swung open, and he entered and shut them. It was dark inside, but he was out of the wind and snow now and his numbed body felt a little relief.

WOODFORD sat down in the corner of the vault. It was a shelter for the night, at least. It seemed rather ironic that he had had to come back here for shelter, but it was something to be thankful for that he had even this. In the morning, when the storm was over, he could leave without anyone seeing and get out of the city.

He sat listening to the wind and snow shriek outside. The stone floor of the vault was very cold, so cold that he felt his limbs stiffening and cramping, and finally he stood up unsteadily and paced

to and fro in the vault, chafing his arms and hands.

If he had only a blanket, or even a heavy coat, to lie upon! He'd freeze there upon the stone floor. Then as he turned in his pacing he bumped into the coffin on the shelf and a new idea was born in his mind.

The coffin! Why, the interior of it was lined deep with silk and satin padding. It would be warm in the coffin. He could sleep in it far better than on the cold stone floor. But did he dare to re-enter it?

Again Woodford felt faintly the former terrors he had experienced when he had awakened in it. But they meant nothing, he told himself. He would not be fastened in, this time, and his frozen flesh yearned for the warmth of the coffin's lining.

Slowly, carefully, he climbed up and lowered himself into the coffin and stretched out. The silk and padding he sank into had a grateful warmth. He lowered his head upon the soft little pillow with a sigh of relief. This was better.

He experienced an almost luxurious comfort now; but after he had lain for a little while he felt that the top of his body was still cold, where the cold air came into the open coffin's top. That cold air entering kept him from being completely warm. If the lid above him were just closed to keep out the cold air——

He reached up and got the edge of the heavy metal lid, then let it down upon himself. He was completely in the dark,

now, inside the closed coffin. But he was warm, too, for the lid kept out the cold air. And he was getting warmer all the time, as his body warmed up the interior.

Yes, it was far more comfortable with the lid closed. An even warmth now pervaded his whole being, and the air inside the coffin was still getting warmer and thicker. He felt a little drowsy now, as he breathed that warm air, felt luxuriously sleepy as he lay on the soft silk.

It was getting a little harder to breathe, somehow, as the air became thicker. He ought really to raise the coffin lid and let in some fresh air. But it was so warm now, and the air outside was so cold, and he was more and more sleepy.

Something dim and receding in his fading consciousness told him that he was on the way to suffocation. But what if he was? was his sleepy thought. He was better off in here than back in the world outside. He had been a fool ever to fight so hard before to get out of his warm, comfortable coffin, to get back to that outside world.

No, it was better like this, the darkness and the warmth and the sleep that advanced. Nobody would ever know that he had awakened at all, that he had been away from here at all. Everything would be just as before—just as before. And with that comforting assurance, John Woodford was swept farther and farther down the dark stream of unconsciousness from which this time there would be no returning.

