

Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

MAY, 1950

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NOVELETTES

- TELL YOUR FORTUNE** Robert Bloch 6
It looked like an ordinary barroom scales; but the little professor had trafficked with darkness to bring it into being.
- DJINN AND BITTERS** Harold Lawlor 22
Fancy being married at ten o'clock—and having a djinn come out of a bottle by afternoon!

SHORT STORIES

- THE ROUND TOWER** Stanton A. Coblenz 36
The ghostly voice pleaded for the stranger to come on; some counter voice, maybe an inward devil, warned him back.
- THE LAST MAN** Seabury Quinn 44
"I have been told you can bring back the spirits of the dead. Is that true?" . . . "Of course," was the reply.
- THE TRIANGLE OF TERROR** William F. Temple 50
The words "Is anybody there?" died in my mouth—for it was manifest there was nobody. Yet I had seen. . . .
- THE MONKEY SPOONS** Mary Elizabeth Counselman 63
These three little monkey spoons were surrounded by forces no one could combat. Forces older than time—older than logic.
- THE LAST THREE SHIPS** Margaret St. Clair 70
Fifteen deserted ships at night might give a graveyard, eerie effect; but it was all right if one kept away from those last three hulls.
- AT THE END OF THE CORRIDOR** Evangeline Walton 74
A story of the Greek undead—if dead men could walk because they had reason for revenge, a lot of them would have done it these last few years.
- THE MAN ON B-17** Stephen Grendon 82
The cinder ball couldn't see the man on the trestle—nor the woman either—but the engineer and the fireman and the conductor, they all did.
- MR. HYDE—AND SEEK** Malcolm M. Ferguson 86
Country doctors are supposed to be able to cope with anything. How about the supernatural?
- THE EYRIE** 4

VERSE

- LUNA AETERNALIS** Clark Ashton Smith 43

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173

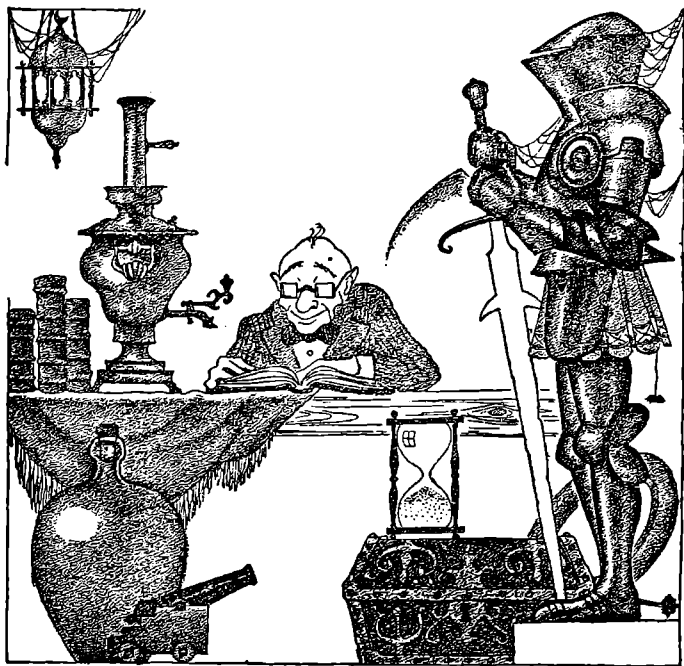
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D. McILWRAITH, Editor

The Monkey Spoons

BY MARY ELIZABETH COUNSELMAN



THE little shop seemed to have taken the musty, worm-eaten quality of furniture and relics it offered for sale. There was an all-pervasive odor of mildew and decaying wood. Dust motes whirled in a shaft of sunlight as the street door opened, with the hushed tinkle of a

"Funeral spoons. . . . What a gift for a man to give his bride!"

bell above the sedate gold letters: JONATHAN SPROULL, ANTIQUES.

The three young people who entered, arm in arm, looked as out of place in such a shop as three children at a board meeting. The girl, a vivacious brunette with a large diamond solitaire on her left hand, linked the two men together—one a tall, easy-going Norse blond, the other small, wiry, and dark, with sensitive features that resembled those of the girl. They stood for a moment, laughing and chattering together—but in lowered tones, somewhat subdued by the atmosphere of the old shop.

"No, no; not three rings, Bob. Rings are so trite," the girl was protesting. "What we want is something unusual—eh, Alan? Something distinctive to link us three together always, like the Three Musketeers, and remind us of our undying . . ."

She broke off with a stifled gasp as a stooped, wrinkled gnome of a man, a hunchback, scuttled out from the shadowy recesses at the rear of the place. There was something spider-like about his appearance, until he smiled. Large luminous brown eyes beamed upon each of them in turn.

"I overheard," he murmured in a mellow friendly voice that matched his eyes. "You are looking for some little memento?" His eyes drifted keenly to the girl. "Soon is your wedding day—yes?" he hazarded. "And you and your . . . your brother? . . . and your fiance wish to buy some antique curio, in (revolting term!) triplicate? As a bond of love and remembrance?"

The trio glanced at one another, jaws dropping.

"Why—yes!" the girl laughed. "You must be psychic!"

"Observation, merely observation and deduction," the old proprietor chuckled pleasantly. "I have very little trade here, worse luck, and much time to meditate! . . . Now, what did you have in mind? Three identical snuffboxes, perhaps? 17th Century? Or what about locketts, Renaissance Italian, with your pictures in each? I have some that fold open in three sections. Two of them could be worn as watchfobs, of course," he smiled at the two utterly unlike but congenial young men.

They grinned back at him, wandering curiously among the cluttered displays of

crow's-nest tables, hammered brass fire-dogs, old spinning wheels, and a hundred other reminders of generations past. Idly they wandered over to a showcase of antique silverware—ornate gold-and-silver sugar shells, pickle forks with tiny demons on the handle, little salt spoons, and graceful kris-shaped butter knives. The girl strolled away by herself, poking about with quiet fascination. Presently her eyes fell on a small, worn, black velvet case pushed half out of sight on a shelf. She leaned to open it, and called out eagerly:

"Look! Oh, Alan—Bob, look! I found some monkey spoons!" She beckoned to her brother and fiance, then smiled across the shop at the old proprietor—whose sudden look of agitation she failed to notice. "These are monkey spoons, aren't they, Mr. Sproull? I've never seen any with a drinking monkey perched on the knob—it's always something stylized, a faun or a skull. These must be very old."

The two men moved to her side, fondly amused at her excitement. The blond one, Bob, looked at the dark one, Alan, and spread his hands humorously.

"What on earth," he drawled, "are monkey spoons? Alan, if we're going to open that antique shop of ours, with my backing and Marcia's and your experience, you'll just have to brief me on these . . ."

THE brother and sister started explaining, both at once, interrupting each other. They gave up, laughing. Then suddenly Mr. Sproull stepped forward, edging unobtrusively between the three young people and the black velvet box.

"Monkey spoons," he explained diffidently, "were presented by the old Dutch patriots to honored guests and relatives, as late as the 17th Century. They were mementoes of some occasion—a funeral, most often. As you can see from these very fine specimens—" Skillfully, he steered the trio away to another showcase, shutting the black velvet box behind him with a furtive gesture. "These," he pointed out one set of five, "are typical. Note the wide, shallow, fluted bowl of the spoon—very thin silver—bearing a hammered-out picture symbolic

of funerals: a man on horseback delivering the invitations, with a churchyard in the background. These bear a likeness of St. Michael, weigher of souls on Judgment Day. This one has a picture of a mourner weeping over a cinerary urn . . ."

"Br-r! Cheerful little trinkets, aren't they?" Bob laughed, resting one hand on Alan's shoulder and sliding his other arm about his fiancee's waist. "Mean to say they passed out these things at funerals, like flowers at a party?"

"Not exactly." Mr. Sproull smiled. "They were hung around the rim of the punch bowl at the *Dood Feast*—'dead feast.' Something like the Irishman's wake. A small silver lozenge, the seal, was always welded at the center of the handle, engraved with the name of the deceased, and the dates of his birth and death. The handles are quite slender, as you see. They curl backwards like the end of a violin to form the knob—on which is mounted a silver faun, or a skull, or . . ."

"Or a monkey?" the girl asked eagerly. "Why 'monkey' spoons, Mr. Sproull?" She drifted over to the black box again and picked up one spoon. "I've always wondered why they're called that."

"That," the old dealer shrugged his humped shoulders, "is an enigma among antique experts. One theory is that the monkey was simply a symbolic invitation to come and be gay at the *Dood Feast*. 'Eat, drink, and be merry,' you know, 'for tomorrow . . . *Zuiging der monkey* was an old Dutch expression meaning 'to get drunk' . . ."

"Ugh!" Marcia's delicate nose wrinkled in distaste. "I certainly wouldn't want everybody getting soused at my funeral! They'll just have to sit around and cry soberly, or they'll get no monkey spoons from me! Remember that, now, Bob!" She laughed and planted a kiss on her fiancee's cheek.

"Hush!" Her brother, the more sensitive of the two men, shuddered visibly. "Marcia, don't be so morbid! People shouldn't joke about . . ."

"Who's morbid?" the girl laughed more gaily, winking at Bob. "Oh, Alan, you're a sissy! Do come and look at these darling monkey spoons over here. Those with the

drinking monkey are very rare—aren't they, Mr. Sproull? There are only three of these . . ."

Her face lighted, and she whirled about at a sudden idea.

"Oh! Why don't we choose these for our keepsakes? I could have mine made into a scarf pin, Bob. Yours and Alan's could be watchfobs, or you could have them welded on silver cigarette cases! Some old Dutchman's funeral spoons! Wouldn't that be just too gruesome and clever? And," she added eagerly, "we can call our antique shop *The Three Spoons* . . . and people will drop in by the droves just to ask us why! . . . Bob, darling, please buy them!"

Her fiance grinned at her fondly, winked at her discomfited brother, and reached for his checkbook with a light shrug.

"All right, my precious, all right! Anything your foolish little heart desires. . . . But, funeral spoons!" He roared with amusement. "What a gift from the groom to the bride! Mr. Sproull, how much are you asking for . . .?"

He broke off, caught by the expression on the face of the hunchbacked antique dealer. Mr. Sproull looked frightened. There was no mistaking that quiver about his mouth, or the agitation in his kindly old eyes.

"I . . . I . . . Wouldn't you prefer something less expensive?" he blurted. "Those particular spoons are . . . almost a collector's item. Besides," he added in an oddly loud tone, "they are not mine to sell, really. *They are not mine!*"

He emphasized the words queerly, and glanced toward the dark rear of the shop as though he were speaking for the benefit of some skulking eavesdropper whom they could not see.

"The former owner," he lowered his voice again in apology, "was a Mrs. Haversham, an elderly widow. Her heirs have not yet been located. She . . . she died intestate about a month ago, shortly after buying the set of four monkey spoons at an auction. She kept one spoon, and left three of them with me to sell for her at a profit. Merely as her agent," he emphasized sharply, with another odd glance toward a par-

ticularly dark corner. "She kept a fourth spoon, not wanting to part with her entire collection. She . . . she was asphyxiated in her garage," he added with apparent irrelevance. "Carbon monoxide gas from her car. An *accidental* death, of course!" he said quickly, again with that nervous glance into the shadows.

THE girl Marcia, her fiance Bob, and her brother Alan looked at one another significantly. The old hunchback was certainly peculiar, to say the least! A *borderline mental case*, Bob's raised eyebrows suggested. With a glance at his fiancee's disappointed expression, he became brisk and business-like.

"Well—you have the legal right to sell the spoons, though. And collect your commission," he pointed out shrewdly. "How much?"

"Ah . . . five hundred dollars," Mr. Sproull murmured, then added with a manner of pleading: "That's exorbitant, of course, and I can find you something much more attractive for the price!"

"Exorbitant—you can say that again! For three little spoons?" the blond young man whistled good-humoredly, but uncapped his fountain pen.

"Er . . . that's five hundred dollars *apiece*," Mr. Sproull said hurriedly. "For each spoon. . . . Now, I'm sure you wouldn't care to pay so much for a . . . a whim! Let me just show you . . ."

Bob set his jaw stubbornly, giving the old dealer an oblique look.

"Mr. Sproull, don't you *want* to make this sale? Look. If you're trying to run up the price," he snapped, "just because my fiancee has taken such a fancy to . . ." He broke off, grinned abruptly, and spread his hands in rueful defeat. "All right, you old pirate! Fifteen hundred it is!" He smiled indulgently at the girl beside him, who was shaking her head violently. "If it's something you really want, darling, you shall have it."

Old Mr. Sproull sighed deeply, with a tone of resignation rather than of satisfaction.

"The price," he said heavily, "is five

hundred for the set, if you insist on buying it . . . But I must tell you this, although I am sure you young people will laugh at me—or perhaps be even more intrigued by these . . . these devilish spoons! You see, they . . ." Mr. Sproull gulped. "They are supposed to be cursed."

The two men did laugh, but the girl's face lighted up. She clapped her hands, as pleased as a child with its first jack-o-lantern.

"Oh—a *curse*! How marvelous! Why didn't you tell us before? Now I simply *must* have them!"

The old hunchback nodded, and shrugged. "As I predicted," he murmured, then doggedly: "The spoons are mementoes of the funeral of an old Dutch patroon—Schuyler Van Grooten; you'll see his name on the seals—who owned and tenant-farmed about half of the Connecticut Valley in the 1600's. Mrs. Haversham had an old Dutch diary written by one of his ancestors; I was able to translate only a few pages when I called at her home, but . . . It seems there were thirteen spoons originally. Rather a significant unlucky number, as the patroon was secretly murdered by friends and relatives who would inherit his estate. One by one, the story goes, he caused six guilty ones to die—exactly as he himself had died. The remaining owners of the monkey spoons became frightened finally and gave theirs away, thereby escaping his vengeance. *But . . .*"

"But anybody who owns the spoons inherits the curse? Is that it?" Marcia cried delightedly. "Alan, isn't it exciting? Oh Bob, do give Mr. Sproull a check before somebody comes in and buys our haunted spoons right out from under our noses!"

The antique dealer looked at her, and sighed. He saw the girl's brother bite his lips, frowning. But the blond young man grinned at his fiancee, and wrote out a check for the three monkey spoons. Opening the black velvet box, he presented one of the spoons to Marcia with an exaggerated bow. The second he gave to Alan, holding it over his wrist like a proffered rapier. The third spoon he thrust carelessly into the pocket of his tweed coat.

Then, laughing at his horse-play, Marcia offered an arm to each of the two young men, and they marched out together, whistling in harmony, into the sunlit street.

Behind them, old Mr. Sproull—although he was not a very devout Catholic—crossed himself. He ran a finger around under his collar and inhaled noisily, aware all at once of the extreme stuffiness of his little shop. It was unusually close in here today, he thought; almost stifling. He scurried to a window and flung it open, gulping in lungfuls of cool autumn air . . . as if, for some reason, he found it *terribly hard to breathe*.

IT WAS almost closing time, about a week later, when the bell over his door tinkled again and two of the attractive young threesome walked into his shop. Mr. Sproull scuttled forward to meet them, beaming in recognition. But his smile faded at sight of the grim expression on the blond man's face, and the stunned, swollen-eyed look of the pretty girl. She had been crying, the old dealer saw—and Bob, her fiance, was tight-lipped and cold with anger.

"Yes?" Mr. Sproull murmured hesitantly. "You . . . were not satisfied with your purchase?" An odd look of hope leaped into his eyes. "You wish to return the spoons, perhaps? Of course, I shall be glad to refund your . . ."

For answer, the blond young man thrust one of the delicate little monkey spoons under his nose, pointing to the tiny silver seal welded at the center of the handle.

"Is this your idea of a joke?" he snapped.

The antique dealer blinked, and, putting on an old-fashioned pair of square-lensed spectacles, peered at the spoon. The blood ebbed slowly from his face.

"I . . . I don't understand," he stammered. "When I sold them to you, the inscriptions read: *Schuyler Van Grooten, Born August 3, 1586, Died June 8, 1631*. But now . . . now it reads *Alan Fentress, Born Sept. 14, 1924; Died Nov. 3, 1949* . . . Why," he broke off, "that's yesterday!"

A sob burst from the girl, and she buried her face against her fiance's shoulder, weeping wildly. Bob glared at Mr. Sproull.

"Yes!" he said harshly. "And Alan was

drowned yesterday—November 3rd, 1949! The death-date engraved on that damned . . . *How the devil did you get hold of Alan's spoon?*" He towered over the old cripple threateningly. "You . . . sadistic old . . . ! You took that seal off, didn't you? And welded the new one on, just to . . . to stir up some freak publicity and boom trade for your crummy little shop! But, Alan!" he ground out through clenched teeth. "Why did you have to pick on Alan? Because you knew he was moody and susceptible to suggestion? Because you knew he'd brood over your little hoax, not telling us? His painting wasn't going well lately . . . so you thought it would be a cinch to drive him to suicide! Out there in the lake yesterday, he . . . he just stopped swimming and went under. When I got his clothes from the locker room, I found this damned spoon you changed! Like a death-sentence . . . !"

Mr. Sproull gasped, looking first at the dead youth's angry friend, then at his grieving sister.

"Oh! Oh no!" he protested. "My dear young people, you surely don't accuse me of . . . ? You're upset. Who wouldn't be? It's the curse," he said quietly. "Remember, I did my best to warn you . . ."

"To plant your story, you mean!" the young man snarled. Glaring at him furiously, he lead the girl toward the door. "Come on, darling. I might have known we'd get no satisfaction out of this . . . this cold-blooded old ghoul! . . . But let me tell you," he threw back furiously at the antique dealer, "when I locate the engraver who changed that inscription, or find out how you learned Alan's birth date . . . I'll come back here and kill you!"

The door slammed with an agitated jingle of the little bell. Mr. Sproull stood for a moment, wringing his hands miserably. He had liked those three light-hearted young people on sight, and would not for the world have wished harm to befall any of them. But . . . there were forces a crippled old man could not combat! Forces older than any item in his musty little shop. Older than logic. Older than time . . .

"Oh, dear heaven!" the hunchback

moaned. "Why didn't I tell them to give those other two spoons away? Melt them down, bury them—anything! If that diary had only told *how* Van Grooten died, perhaps I could have warned them to avoid. . . . But there were only hints! The writer never did come out and say. . . . But that young man is intelligent. Perhaps he could come to some conclusion that I've missed. . . .!"

He turned and ran for the telephone directory, leafing through it hastily to find the names *Fentress* or *Milam*, the signature on the young man's check. For an hour he clung to the phone, calling every Fentress and Milam in the book—but there was no "Robert" Milam. Mr. Sproull tried the hotels, then the funeral homes to trace the dead brother, Alan. Finally he hung up, defeated, concluding that they were all from out of town. He sat staring at the telephone then, wringing his wrinkled old hands in the helpless anguish of one who can only wait . . . wait . . . for disaster.

But the period of waiting was not long.

THREE days later, just at noon, the doorbell tinkled again. Mr. Sproull looked up from a six-branched candelabra he was polishing, to see a disheveled figure swaying a few feet from him. It was Bob Milam, his face drawn and covered with a stubble of beard, his eyes bloodshot and puffy from drinking. In his hand he held an ugly little automatic.

Mr. Sproull caught his breath, and stood very still. Then, despite his own fear, he burst out:

"Oh, my poor young friend! The . . . the second spoon? Your . . . fiancée?"

The blond man's mouth twisted with pain and bitterness. For reply, he flung another of the monkey spoons at the old dealer's feet. Mr. Sproull stooped to pick it up. He paled, and nodded. The tiny oval seal on the handle was engraved to read:

Marcia Fentress
Born April 17, 1927
Died November 6, 1949

At the old man's nod, Bob's eyes nar-

rowed. He said not a word, but the ominous click of the safety catch on his gun was eloquent enough. Yet there was more pity than terror in Mr. Sproull's face.

"*Ohh!*" His murmur of shocked sympathy had a genuine ring. "H-how did she . . .?"

"My fiancée," the young man grated bitterly, "was terribly grief-stricken at her brother's death—you figured on that, too, didn't you? You insane, twisted. . . ." His voice broke on a sob of impotent rage. "Alan and Marcia were inseparable; we three were, in fact. Marcia couldn't sleep, so last night she took a big dose of sleeping pills. While . . ." He gulped, then plunged on miserably, "While she was drugged, a . . . a very large beauty pillow on her bed fell over her face, somehow. She . . . It wasn't the sleeping pills; she . . . smothered to death! The coroner called it an accident," he lashed out. "But I call it murder! You murdered Alan, too! I can't prove it, but I surely as hell can. . . .!"

With a sob he leveled the gun at the old antique dealer's heart, his mouth working with hate and grief. At sight of his tortured young face, Mr. Sproull dabbed at his eyes, oblivious to his own danger.

"My poor, unfortunate young friend!" he murmured pityingly. "You can't believe I would cause such tragedy, for a few paltry dollars? I did not change those seals—but I can not hope to persuade anyone as matter-of-fact as yourself to believe in . . . in the supernatural. The diary recounts that . . . that, when each guest at Van Grooten's Dood Feest died, *their* spoons changed, too! Mrs. Haversham's seal altered also—the lawyer found it later among her effects, but assumed it to be the grim jest of some house-servant. . . ."

Bob Milam snorted derisively. But the murderous anger in his eyes ebbed slowly, and the gun in his hand wavered.

"You're insane," he said heavily. "Maybe you don't even realize you changed those seals. Maybe your twisted mind really believes all that silly guff about . . . some old Dutchman who . . ."

His shoulders slumped all at once. He swayed, passing one hand over his bleary,

eyes. The gun in his other hand clattered to the floor. Suddenly he snatched the monkey spoon and flung it down the furnace grating.

"Insane," he mumbled. "I . . . I can't shoot a crazy, crippled old man in cold blood! But . . . Oh, why did you do it?" he groaned, staring at the hunchback. "Why, Mr. Sproull? *Why?* My best friend, and then my fiancée? I'd gladly have signed over my whole bank account to you, if it was money you . . .!"

"Oh, *please!*" the antique dealer cried out in despair. "You *must* believe that I had no part in . . . I tried to phone you, to warn you! Tried to figure out the *manner* of death, so you could avoid . . . But they all died so differently! Mrs. Haversham, asphyxiated. Your friend, drowned. And your lovely fiancée . . ." The old man's eyes widened suddenly. "Ah! Now I understand! It's true! It all ties together . . . *Listen to me!*"

Bob Milam had turned unsteadily toward the door, but Mr. Sproull sidled after him like a small persistent crab and seized him by the arm.

"No, no! Wait! You must listen!" he gasped. "The diary mentioned that Schuyler Van Grooten was subject to 'sleeping fits'—a cataleptic. His intimate friends and relatives must have known that, but . . . but they . . . *wait!*" he begged. "*Your monkey spoon, where is it? You must give it away! At once!*" the old dealer insisted excitedly. "To . . . to some impersonal agency. The Scrap-metal Drive—yes, that's it! Get it out of your possession, or you, too, will . . . ! So much hate, such hunger for revenge hovers about them! Like a piece of metal that has been magnetized, they can actually draw disaster to anyone who . . ."

But at that moment the blond young man jerked his arm loose and plunged out into the street, wanting only to get away from this crazy old man who had caused him so much grief in the space of a few short days. Mr. Sproull pattered after him, calling excitedly for him to wait. But by the time he reached the curb, Bob Milam

had whistled down a passing cab and was climbing into it. The old hunchback hurried to the curb and strained to catch the address. But the young man was only telling the driver, wearily:

"Drive around. Just drive. Anywhere . . . I don't care."

The antique dealer's arms dropped to his sides limply in defeat. He watched the taxi speed out of sight, then turned slowly and walked slowly, thoughtfully, back into his shop.

THE evening paper, left under his door as usual, carried the story. A taxi was ambling along 187th Street, where wreckers were busy razing an old warehouse. Somehow the dynamite charge went off sooner than was intended . . . and a crumbling wall of bricks and mortar fell on the cab as it passed. The cabby managed to dig his way out. But the single passenger, an intoxicated young man identified as one Robert Milam of New Jersey, could not be pulled out of the wreckage for almost an hour. He was dead when frantic workmen did finally reach him—not crushed, but trapped without air in the rear seat of the taxi cab . . .

And in his pocket the police found a peculiar-looking spoon, inscribed with his name, the date of his birth—and the very date of his death!

Mr. Sproull finished reading, then took off his square-lensed glasses and polished them with a hand that trembled. There was nothing, he mused philosophically, really nothing at all that he could have done to save those three nice young people, who had all three died the same way—fighting for breath; smothered to death by one agency or another. Just exactly as Mrs. Haversham had died, in her exhaust-filled garage.

And just as, centuries ago, an old Dutch patrol, one Schuyler Van Grooten, had died—clawing and screaming and gasping for breath in his coffin, awakened from one of his cataleptic trances to find that his greedy heirs had deliberately buried him alive . . .