

WEIRD TALES

THE UNIQUE MAGAZINE

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Published monthly by THE RURAL PUBLISHING CORPORATION, 325 N. Capitol Ave., Indianapolis, Ind. Application made for entry as second-class matter at the postoffice at Indianapolis, Indiana. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$3.00 a year in the United States; \$3.50 in Canada. The publishers are not responsible for manuscripts lost in transit. Address all manuscripts and other editorial matters to WEIRD TALES, 864 N. Clark St., Chicago, Ill. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and publishers are cautioned against using the same, either wholly or in part.

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VOLUME 1

25 Cents

NUMBER 2

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YOUNG & WARD, 168 N. Michigan Boulevard, Chicago,
Advertising Agents for WEIRD TALES

The Parlor Cemetery

A Grisly Satire

By C. E. Howard

GOOD MORNING! I'm getting the information for the new city directory. May I step in and rest a moment while I'm asking you a few questions?"

"Well, ye—es, I reckon yuh kin come in and set," conceded the old lady who had answered my knock, "but I won't give yuh no order. Mister. I haint much of a booker."

"Oh, I don't sell the books," I hastened to assure her, as I laid my sample volume on the floor by my chair and placed my hat on it. "I just go around from house to house gathering the names for it. The company publishes and sells the book. I don't have anything to do with that part of it."

"Oh, you jes' do th' authorin'? It must take yuh consid'ble time to write as big a book as that! Do yuh do it all 'lone?"

"No; we have fifty-four men working on it now, and it will take about two months to get it all. Now may I ask—?"

"How much does it cost?"

"This year they will sell for fifteen dollars—"

"Apieces!" she shrilled. "My land o' livin'! Whoever buys th' things?"

"All the big stores keep them, especially the drug stores, for the benefit of the public, you know. Now your name is—?"

"Well, what's it all 'bout, anyhow?" she insisted. "An' what's it fur? Is it a tillyphone dickshinary?"

"Something like that. It contains the names and addresses of everybody living in this city, and all the big establishments keep one so that if anybody wishes to find out where anyone else lives they just go in some store and look in this directory and there it is. Now, will you give me your name for the new book, please?"

"My name? W'y, my name is— Now, is this a-goin' to cost me anything? Yuh know I said I wouldn't take none afore I let yuh in."

"It will not cost you a cent," I told her earnestly, "and it may do you some good. See"—running through the leaves of the book in which I entered the statistics—"how many people I have interviewed this morning, and all of them gave me the information I asked for. Now you will see all there is to it; right down here on this top line I write your name—what did you say it was?"

"I never said yit; but it was Cook."

"Ah!" We were off at last! "Cook"—I paused at the "k" and asked, "Do you spell it the short way or with an 'e'?"

"Which?"

"How do you spell it? 'C-double-o-k,' or 'C-double-o-k-e'?"

"No; not with no 'e' on to it! That would be cooky! It was jes' plain Cook—C-o-o-k."

I was willing to let it go at that and wrote it down. "And your first name now?"

"My fust name? I don't tell my fust name to no strangers—'specially men!"

"I beg your pardon, but I am not asking that from impertinence, Mrs. Cook," I explained carefully. "We do not mean to pry into people's personal affairs—such things are of no concern to us—but you see there are probably a hundred or more Cooks in this city and if we didn't have their first names there would be no telling them apart. All the ladies so far have told me their first names," I declared, holding my book toward her with the evidence.

After peering at it intently for some time she relaxed in her chair, reassured. "Well, 'tain't no name to be 'shamed of, if 'tis old-fashioned. It's Ann."

"Ann—'A-n-n'." I spelled aloud, to give her the chance to correct me if necessary. Thinking of the famous query connected with that name and thankful I didn't have to ask that, too, I continued:

"You have a husband?"

"No, not now. I've had 'em, though."

"Ah, a widow, then—that is, I presume your husband is not alive, Mrs. Cook?" I essayed gently, avoiding, as always, the direct interrogation as to grass-widowship.

"No; they're all on 'em dead now; but, Mister, my name ain't Cook—it's Hay!"

"What!" I exclaimed. "Why, I understood you to say it was Cook?"

"Well, yuh understood right. It was Cook—that what's yuh asked me, what it was—but it's Hay now. 'Bout two years after Cook went up in smoke I married a feller named Hay, see?"

"OH, YES," I smiled cheerfully, and, reversing my pencil I endeavored to rub off the former husband's name.

Of course the flimsy paper tore. I yanked out the sheet and began again.

"'H-a-y,' Hay," I put down, writing lightly with an eye to more erasures or corrections. "Just the plain, short Hay, I presume?"

"Yes, jes' th' plain Hay—not timothy ner alfalfy ner none o' them fancy hoss brekfus foods. My lan'!" she broke out in astonishment, "I sh'uld think the' comp'ny'd git men to do this work that c'uld spell!"

"That is one of the things we are told to be most careful about, Mrs.—ah—Hay. We must always ask everybody's name and just how they spell it, even if we think we know. Often people having the same sounding name spell it differently, and if it goes in the directory wrong they generally blame us. And now, may I ask," I said sympathetically, recalling the peculiar way in which she had spoken of the late Mr. Cook's decease, "if your former husband lost his life in a fire?"

"Who, Cook? Oh, yuh mean what'd I mean when I spoke o' 'im goin' up in smoke? No, he was plumb dead—I was sattyfied o' that, afore he was burned. That's th' way I've had 'em all done; kin' of a habit I got into, I reckon, but seems to me 'twas a pretty good habit. That's Cook, second from th' right-hand end," she said calmly, pointing to an object on the humble mantel as though she were indicating a specimen in a museum.

"How! What?" I gasped, as every separate hair on my head arose and tried to spring from its root-cell.

"W'y, I had all my husban's' bodies consoomed by fire—what d'yuh call it, cremated?—w'en they up an lef' me, an' that's the' ashes of all on 'em in them dishes there! Seems t'

me that's th' bes' way t' do with dead folks—have your own cem'terry right in your house where it's handy. It's 'specially nice when one moves 'round a good deal like I've done. I never c'uld a-forded t' gone visitin' here an' there t' that many graves scattered 'bout in dif'rent states. Besides, it saves tumstones an' th' 'spense o' takin' care o' the lots."

Gradually, I grasped the woman's meaning as she continued to rock back and forth and utter her placid Mrs. Jarley explanation. The men who had been so unfeelingly abrupt as to "up an' leave" this poor creature had evidently, each in his turn, been cremated, and now their ashes, side by side, served to adorn the mantel and comfort the heart of the faithful widow. "Imperial Caesar, dead and turned to clay. . . ." I gazed at the row of assorted receptacles with awe and back at the woman with feelings still more curious.

"Some folks thinks them's odd kin' o' coffins," she continued, "but I d'know what c'uld be more 'propriate. Yuh see, I've tried t' have each one sort o' repasent either th' man hisself or his trade. Now, for instance, this here one," she explained, rising and placing her hand on a small stone jar at the left end of the line—there were five of these unique memorials altogether—"this was my fust husban', John Marmyduke. Th' label on th' crock, yuh'll notice, is 'Marmylade', an' that's purt' near his name, an' then it almose d'scribes his dispasshun, too. Th' grocer tol' me that marmylade was a kin' o' English jam, an' John was sort o' sweet-tempered, fer a man, so I thought one o' them stun things 'ud do fine to keep him in.

"This is William Thompson here," she continued, tapping a small tea caddy with her thimble. "He was a teacher, an' I always called 'im Mr. T. so w'en he departed I thinks to myself, thinks I, 'Ous o' them little chests that Chinymens packs tea in is

jes' th' ticket fer yuh'—tea standin' for both his name an' his callin', do you see?'"

I expressed my admiration for this delightful idea, and she proceeded with her cataloguing:

"This third cuhlection, in th' fruit jar, is Mason. That was his name an' his trade, an' he belonged to that lodge an' that's the make o' th' jar, so, considerin' all them facks, I d'know what c'uld be a fitter tum fer 'im. Mason fell off a roof one day an' broke his back, an' though he lived six months, somehow, he was never much 'count arter that. He was a big man—weighed 225 afore breakfus—an' he made such a pile o' ashes, spite o' their keepin' him in the oven double time, that it took a gallon jar to hol' his leavin's. I had some quart jars on hand already an' 'spected to put 'im in one of 'em, but I never begrudged buyin' a bigger one fer he was always, or purt' near always gen'rous with me, an' then I knew I was savin' an undertaker's bill, anyhow.

"Now, I wa'n't altogether sattyfied with th' coffin I fin-ly chose fer Cook," she said, looking at me doubtfully, as she motioned toward the small japanned tin bread-box that was the next mortuary souvenir on the shelf. "I worried over th' matter th' hull time he was sick, but I never got a mite o' help from 'im. Ev'ry time I tried to git that man to suggest what he thought he'd rest cumft-ble in he'd go on frightful. Doctor said his temper prob'bly shortened his life.

"Well, at last I *dec*-ided on the bread box as comin' as near to repasentin' him as anything I c'uld think on—his name bein' Cook an' him havin' occupied as a baker as long's he was 'live. What's your 'pinion 'bout it, Mister?'"

I declared that if Mr. Cook did not now rest in peace and content he was certainly a hard man to please.

"TH' LAS' one there, as I tole yuh," she went on, with something like animation, "is Mr. Hay, an' I do feel consid'able proud over his casket—it sure was a happy thought o' mine. See!" She took down the object and held it in the sunlight where I could get a plainer view. "He died jes' las' year."

Mr. Hay's ashes reposed in one of the large square glass perfume bottles such as most druggists carry, and the ornate label thereon had become the painfully true epitaph, "New Mown Hay"!

When I could trust my voice, I inquired, "was he ill long?"

"No; he wa'n't ill a-tall. He left me kinda on'spectedly. However, he always was a great man fer doin' things on th' impulse o' th' moment. We was livin' out on a farm then, an' one day Mr. Hay was cutting' grass in th' orchard an' I 'spose he must 'a' struck a nest o' bees. Anyhow, somethin' started th' team an' they run 'way an' throwed him off in front o' th' knives, an' th' horses stepped on him a few times an' th' machine finished it up. He cert'inly was most completely dead when we reached him. Hired man tole me he had to gether him up with a rake an' wheelbarrer. Only forty-six years ol', too, he was—mowed down in his prime!

"Well, this is a funny world, ain't it? Some women kin take one man an' keep him 'live an' whole fer fifty or sixty years, but I sure had bad luck with my batch o' husban's. It's

a comfort to me, though, that I kin have 'em with me in death, at least. I take down their monnyments ev'ry mornin' an' dust 'em off, an' w'en-ever I go on th' keers vis'tin' anywheres I pack one in my valeese an' carry it along. When I git it out an' put it up in my room, w'erever I be, I feel right to hum."

I succeeded in getting answers to the rest of my questions in another half hour, and I went on my way, dazed. And though, when my day's work was over, I had no rarebit for supper, yet a vision came to me sometime between the dark and the daylight. I thought I saw myself fall ill and die, and my body was prepared for cremation.

I struggled to escape, to call out, but in vain. They slid me into a kiln and the inexorable heat dissolved flesh, blood and bone. Then some brutal, careless wretch came and swept me up on a dustpan, and put me in a sack and delivered me over to an eager old woman, whose face seemed strangely familiar.

This ghoulish woman bore me away to her home and went to work trying to pack me down in a catsup bottle. It was too small. It seemed to press on my throat. I was choking. I struggled. I shrieked.

And I awoke—to find, thank Heaven, that a large crayon portrait above my bed had fallen down and was now around my neck, and the man in the next room was hammering on the wall with his shoe and shouting and swearing at me.