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Virgil Finlay

"His eyes, his ears, his throat were tortured with choking dust."

The Sitter in the Mound

By BRUCE BRYAN

Faverly was an archeologist, a robber of graves, and fearful was his discovery in that weird Indian burial mound

FFAVERLY came out to meet me just before sundown. I had been plowing that flat field adjacent to the bottomland, and together we drove the weary team homeward. The sun was just slipping behind that low, sinister-looking mound over by the river, and already the early spring warmth was deserting the air.

Perhaps that is why I shivered. It couldn't have been anything else that caused that momentary, almost reflexive shudder to run through my body. There was nothing particularly suggestive in the mound's outward appearance, despite the few rotting headboards and a couple of crumbling crosses indicating the presence of long-forgotten pioneer graves. Nor was I at all superstitious.

I say *was*. . . .

As for Faverly—there was nothing in his manner to set him apart from other men except the quiet staidness that always seems to mark the scholar. He had been with us only a day or two, but he seemed to enjoy my company even though I was at least ten years his junior.

Naturally, I felt not a little flattered. He was a largish man, with an angular gait and a Websterian dome under a great shock of unruly black hair. Knowledge seemed written all over him, and I rather pictured him addressing a scientific conclave than seeking the companionship of a country yoke; though, of course, I had ambitions of my own, too.

He had come to our farm as a "paying guest" on the recommendation of a mutual friend as the ideal place in which to hide away from everything but Nature itself. He wanted, he explained, a long rest. Even a man engaged in his profession, it seems, eventually reaches a point of saturation that calls out insistently for relief. And his doctor had told him that the plea of overtaxed nerves was not one to go indefinitely unheeded.

A vacation was what he wanted, and if a man can't find forgetfulness from his usual routine in the peaceful Ohio valley, with the nearest town eight or nine miles away and the neighbors out of shouting distance, it must be because he doesn't recognize it when he's introduced to it. But just what he sought to forget I didn't find out until later.

After the evening chores were done, we would sit in a pair of stiffly uncomfortable chairs and the sagging porch of the old frame house, if the air permitted, and talk about everything under the sun. I repeat that I was inwardly gratified to observe the apparent interest so erudite a person took in my obviously banal conversation. But gradually I discovered that a man will sometimes seize eagerly at trivialities, especially if he is trying to put something else out of his mind.

At first, of course, we only met at evening. My own vacation was far from being what the term implies. I was planning

to complete my senior year at the university next semester, and inasmuch as my father had managed to scrape up the necessary expense money, I felt it incumbent on me to take the place of the hired man he had to let go. So my daylight hours were taken up by the kind of toil that wrings honest sweat from a man's brow.

BEYOND the fact that Faverly was an archeologist of some repute, we knew little of him. He worked for a museum in Minneapolis, but never brought the subject up for question or discussion. For the first day or so at the farm he slept late in the morning, ate a combination breakfast and lunch, and then disappeared until supper-time with a book under his arm or a fishing-rod over his shoulder.

Then he found that strolling out to meet me as I came in each evening from my day's work constituted a cooling and effortless exercise. However, this was the first time he had come as far as the outlying field.

I hailed him as he started to pick his way across the newly turned furrows, and he waited until I came up and joined him.

"Afraid I might turn my ankle?" he asked, with a smile. "Maybe I don't look it now, but I was actually born on a farm—years ago." He sighed. "So many years, indeed, that a horse is still pretty much of a novelty to me. Mind if I drive the team in?"

As I surrendered the reins to him, I noticed for the first time the curious ring on the middle finger of his left hand. There was something incongruous about it. The band was of gold, but in it was set an oddly carved turquoise. For some reason the combination made me think of a "June-and-December" wedding.

"Oh," said Faverly, in reply to my casual query, "it's just a sort of—well, you might call it a keepsake. I had it set in a ring as a reminder of a rather narrow escape."

He stopped suddenly, as if he had said more than he meant to. His gaze swerved aside.

I had to repeat my "How's that?" because his eyes had wandered off beyond the field to the grassy, tree-covered hummock that rose up out of the river bottoms.

"Eh?" His mind seemed to come back with a jerk. He smiled almost regretfully.

I put the question to him again. He hesitated.

"I really came here to forget about it," he said then, as if reluctantly. "But I guess there's no reason why I shouldn't tell you. There's a fever in my blood—yes, that's what it must be! I'm an archeologist, you know, but plenty of people might better call me a ghoul. Of course, we pride ourselves that our digging is solely for scientific knowledge, but I suppose it amounts to the same thing in the end. Despoiled graves! Human jackals! After all, grave-robbing is grave-robbing, whatever the motive. It's a lust."

He laughed and pointed to the mound down by the river. It was low and conical in shape, but the gathering shadows caused it to grow in size until it dominated the flat countryside.

"Speaking of Indian mounds," resumed Faverly, "that's one, isn't it?"

"I don't know," I replied. "It might be. I've plowed up a lot of arrowheads and chunks of old pottery hereabout. But some of the early pioneers who settled this valley are buried there. You can still find fragments of rotted old crosses sticking out of the ground. What's that got to do with the close shave you mentioned?"

Faverly's expression clouded, as if with unpleasant reminiscence.

"There were two of them, as a matter of fact. If there'd only been one it might seem sort of ridiculous. But after the second—so like the first—I rather lost my grip. Three strikes is out, you know!" He grinned wryly.

I waited patiently, feeling called on for no comment.

"It was on an expedition in the Hope-well area," went on Faverly after a moment. "We'd opened a burial mound and found the old chief in his rock-lined crypt. It was an unusual type of burial, for instead of lying supine the skeleton was seated in a crouched position on a throne-like slab. On its chest, hanging from the neck, was a copper breastplate in the center of which was set a roughly carved turquoise.

"It was while I was reaching for this pectoral that the trench, which was about fifteen feet deep at this point, caved in on me. By the time they had dug me out I was nearly done in. But when I came to, I found the green stone clasped in my palm. The experience shook me up a bit, but not for long. As you can see, the turquoise is carved in the shape of the sacred Thunderbird. So I had it made into a ring, more from sentiment, perhaps, than because of its ornamental qualities."

Again his eyes drifted off to that mound, now steeped in gloom behind us. There was an almost predatory look in them.

"The next time," continued Faverly, after we had trudged for possibly fifty yards in silence, "was at a site some two hundred miles removed. Again we had uncovered the central inhumation in an ancient mound. You can believe it or not, Grey, but as I crawled into that hollow burial crypt and stared at the fleshless cadaver lolling awkwardly on its stone seat—I could have sworn I was back in the first!

"Everything seemed identically the same, the low rectangular vault, the posture of the skeleton, even the copper breastplate. There was only one discordant note: *where the turquoise should have been set in the metal pectoral was only an empty socket!*"

He paused. And as I tried to visualize the macabre scene I thought I detected a

breathless sort of catch to his voice. Resisting an impulse to look back toward that darkness-enshrouded mound behind us, I felt that he was waiting for some remark on my part.

"Of course," I said slowly, "it was only a notion, induced by your previous experience."

"Perhaps," agreed Faverly, looking at me oddly. "But as I leaned over to examine the thing—the whole world seemed to fall in on me. This time I didn't get off so easily. Three of my ribs were broken, and it took the men who dug me out nearly half an hour to resuscitate me!"

He clucked the horses around a shallow pit. And again I saw him turn his head to look behind.

"So that's why you decided to give up the work and take a rest?" I ventured.

"Exactly," he nodded. "But as I said just now, it must be something in my blood. Maybe my ancestors were 'night doctors'." He laughed, without amusement. "At any rate, whenever I see some old Indian earthwork, I'm never at ease until I'm delving into it with pick and shovel."

WE STRODE along behind the team in silence. As the old red barn came into view, Faverly cleared his throat nervously.

"By the way," he asked, with too studied a casualness, "is that mound back there situated on your property?"

"Yes," I said reluctantly. "We own down to the high-water mark on the river."

He hesitated again, then burst out abruptly:

"Do you suppose your father'd mind if I drove a trench through it? Looks to me as if it belongs to the Hopewell culture. I'm planning a monograph on that period and it might be——"

It was my turn to hesitate. Then I kicked myself mentally for the crazy

thoughts that were running through my mind.

"It'd be all right with Dad," I assured him. "But I'm not so certain about the neighbors. They have their local superstitions, you know. And there's a tradition that anyone who digs into the Indian mounds in this vicinity will bring down a horrible curse on his head. Besides, there are those pioneer graves."

Faverly's eyes gleamed with a rabid enthusiasm.

"We wouldn't need to touch them," he told me. "And as for the curse—what do you think?"

I shrugged. What was my opinion to a man like Faverly?

And so it was arranged that night at supper. My father, while not a superstitious man, gave his consent somewhat diffidently. His only compunction was the possible antagonism of such hard-shelled neighbors as we had, some of whom were said to be directly descended from the old-timers interred in the mound.

Next morning at dawn I set out to resume my plowing. Faverly met me at the barn to get picks and shovels. He'd hired several young Negroes to serve as laborers, and planned to drive an exploratory trench right through the heart of the ancient hummock. I wished him luck and went on about my work.

From time to time during the day I looked across the field toward the mound, but as Faverly was driving his trench from the far side I was unable to see him. But that evening, just as I finished the last furrow, he came plodding over to meet me.

"Good hunting?" I asked carelessly.

"Great!" he exploded. "You could never guess. I want you to come over and take a look while it's still light."

NODDING acquiescence, I accompanied him down to the river bottoms. Circling the mound, I stared at his

excavation. Faverly's helpers had been dismissed for the day, but we followed the trench to the center of the great barrow and peered into the yawning burial crypt burrowed out of its very core. Crouching down, we crawled part-way in.

Faverly produced a flashlight. "You won't believe this," he whispered, looking at me queerly. Then he directed the beam of the torch into the vault.

A whistle of surprise escaped my lips. It was the first thing of the sort I had ever seen.

The crypt was roughly rectangular, low-roofed and lined with fairly uniform slabs of stone. On the hard-packed floor were rotted bows and arrows, stone spearheads, several pieces of broken pottery and some charred corncobs. But in the very center of the burial chamber was a crudely throne-like stone seat.

Sprawled loosely on this primitive throne was a moldering skeleton.

I can remember today the curiously evil expression its slack-jawed death's-head grin conveyed. But even more clearly do I recall the hammered copper breastplate that hung from its jointed neck—a pectoral that might once have been inlaid with turquoise, except that the single inlay socket was empty!

I stared at Faverly. I couldn't figure out whether he was afraid or not. At least, he was breathing hard, but that may have been merely the elation of the born scientist at a new discovery.

"The bones are in fair condition!" he exclaimed tersely. "Help me put them in this box and we'll carry them back with us. If we leave the skeleton here the air will decompose it."

I felt more like getting out of that charnel place while the getting was good. In my imagination, I seemed to see those slabbed walls bulging inward. But I stayed. It didn't take long to transfer the bones to the box. Then we went back after the

team and continued on to the farmhouse. While I stabled and fed the horses, Faverly deposited the box in a vacant stall in the barn.

That night at supper my father reported that several of the neighbors had been over to protest against what they regarded as a desecration of the dead. They warned him that no good could come of it. But having given his permission to open the mound, my father refused to retract it.

As with most country folk, my parents retired early. Faverly and I sat for a while on the porch, however, to enjoy the cool spring air. The archeologist in him had completely superseded the purpose for which he had come to our farm. Our conversation turned, naturally enough, to the prehistoric natives who had left their remains in the form of earthworks scattered throughout the Ohio River valley.

Briefly, he sketched the story of the ancient Mound Builders as gleaned from his researches, rating them second only to the Puebloans of the Southwest in aboriginal cultural development. But, he concluded, the race was practically extinct at the time Ponce de Leon came into the country on his mad search for the Fountain of Youth.

"Say!" I exclaimed suddenly, my imagination fired by the magic of his words, "I'm all through with that field! How about my helping you with the excavation tomorrow?"

Faverly smiled.

"So you want to become a grave-robber, too?" he asked, his mood changing.

"It's not grave-robbing," I denied impatiently. "Those old redskins have been dead for centuries."

"Then Time is both the answer and the excuse?" parried the scientist. "Perhaps you are right. Five hundred years ago I'd have been burned at the stake for disintering the dead. Today no one cares, except the superstitious. If I looted a modern

grave in some city cemetery I'd get a prison sentence; if I robbed the same grave a few centuries hence I'd be doing it with the benediction and financial backing of some scientific institution. It's all very amusing, in a way. Do you recall the line in that poem that went, 'My God, how lonely the dead are!' Sometimes I wonder if they are not jealous of their loneliness."

This was a line of philosophy in which I could not take an intelligent part, so after it was agreed that I should join him in his work next day, we said good-night.

EARLY the following morning, after waiting in vain for the Negro boys to show up, Faverly and I shouldered our tools and set out for the mound.

"We don't really need the superstitious fools," remarked the archeologist. "The heavy part of the work is all done."

But as we came up to the mound we were stunned. The entire excavation, including a ten or twelve foot trench, had been completely filled in.

"It couldn't possibly be the wind," stammered Faverly.

"Must be some of the neighbors," I hazarded weakly. "They didn't like the idea in the first place. I'll bet they came here last night and shoveled all this dirt back in."

The scientist's jaw set stubbornly.

"Then we'll just dig it out again," he announced grimly. "Fortunately, the earth is still loose."

And so we did. But when we came again to that rock-lined burial crypt and found the skeleton sitting placidly in the same posture in the same place, I felt a violent nausea in the pit of my stomach.

Faverly stared at it for several moments as if he doubted the evidence of his eyes. His face was paper-white, and he glanced involuntarily at the walls that surrounded us, as if he momentarily expected them to fall in.

Drawing a deep breath, he began painstakingly to transfer the dried bones into another box. I held the flashlight for him and I recall distinctly, as insignificant things often stick in one's memory, how the turquoise stone in his ring almost balefully reflected the rays of the light.

When we reached the barn with the second box of bones from the mound, Faverly went right to the box he had deposited in the stall the night before. It was there, all right, but it was empty. Faverly turned and looked at me, and now there was a hint of fear in his eyes. But I've got to hand it to him for nerve.

"Your neighbors are clever," he said, with a grating laugh. "I really don't see how they reassembled the skeleton. Even an accomplished anatomist couldn't rearticulate loose bones without wire or something to hold them in place. But they've gone to a lot of useless trouble if they're trying to frighten me off."

We said nothing to my father about what had happened. And after supper, when we were alone on the porch, Faverly was reluctant to discuss it. So at last I yawned and remarked that I was turning in.

"I'll finish this pipe," said Faverly. "See you first thing in the morning."

As he inhaled deeply, the bowl of the pipe glowed and the glow was reflected by the green stone on the middle finger of his left hand.

But at breakfast Faverly was missing. Nor did he reply when I knocked on his door. Finally, I turned the knob and entered. His bed had not been slept in. Thinking that perhaps he had gone on ahead without eating, I set out for the mound.

THE morning sun was streaming down, and birds were twittering gayly in willows and sumac. The air had that bracing quality that intoxicates a man with the joy of simply being alive. But

as I approached the ancient mound an unexplainable chill settled over me. I stopped dead and stared, a half-muttered curse springing to my lips. What was it Faverly had said, half banteringly, just the other night?

"Sometimes I wonder if they are not jealous of their loneliness!"

The excavation had been filled in again overnight. And Faverly was nowhere in sight.

Overcome by a sudden mad urge, I threw myself feverishly into the task of re-excavating the trench. It took me several hours, and I was sweating like a horse when I finally laid bare once more the opening into the burial vault. For a moment I hesitated, shaken by an unnamed fear. I felt like turning tail and running from the place. But can any man escape his fear simply by turning back? Besides, I had to know—I *had* to know. . . .

I had no flashlight. As I crawled into the opening on hands and knees, I struck a match.

Everything seemed the same as it was before. *Everything*—oh, God!

There was the skeleton, every bone articulated in place, sprawling on its throne-like seat. And there on its hollow breast was the copper plaque with its empty, gaping socket. Yes, empty! I felt an involuntary sigh of relief rising to my lips—then the match burned my fingers and went out.

Hurriedly, I lit another. As it flared up, a reflecting gleam was cast back at me, like the glittering eye of a coiled serpent. My eyes ran it down, focussed on it—and then I dropped the match and fell back out of the low opening with an unrestrained shriek.

There was a dull rumbling sound as my boots scrambled frantically in the loose earth. Like rushing water seeking its own level, the whole mound caved in, demolishing the burial crypt and inundating me to

my knees in the trench. My eyes, my ears, my throat were tortured with choking dust as I fought my way out. But I wasn't even thinking of that—neither of the physical discomfort nor of my narrow escape from death. There are worse things than death.

Instead, my mind dwelt with horrible vividness on the grinning skeleton sitting in the mound.

On that grinning skeleton—and the turquoise ring that gleamed from the middle finger of its bony left hand!