

WEIRD CRIMES

No. 2. *The Grave Robbers*

By SEABURY QUINN

THE thief who would "steal the pennies off a dead man's eyes" is proverbially the meanest crook in the world.

Judged by present-day standards, he is also a piker; for, with post-war inflation, like everything else, mortuary thievery has increased its ante.

Robbing the dead, or, more accurately, stealing from the bereaved, is so mean a form of crime that it is, fortunately, seldom met with. Yet a few crooks have specialized in this despicable thievery and found it—while it lasted—exceedingly remunerative.

Late in 1921 and early in 1922 the police of Chicago began to receive complaints from recently bereaved residents of the city's West Side. The articles stolen varied in kind and value, but the circumstances surrounding the crimes were invariably the same. A family which had lost a member would attend the interment, and when they returned they found their home had been burglarized and rifled of every valuable of an easily portable nature.

For three months this funeral burglar carried his flashlight and jimmy in the wake of death in Chicago's West Side. More than fifteen complaints were lodged with the authorities—and the burglaries went merrily on.

At last the police department decided to set a trap for the thief. Special officers were detailed to the case, and when a prominent resident died they asked permission to attend the funeral services.

When the friends and mourners had entered the waiting limousines and driven off to the cemetery the officers remained behind. Scarcely had the last motor in the funeral procession disappeared when the telephone began to ring imperatively. The officers glanced significantly at each other and let the bell continue to jangle.

Five minutes passed. Again the 'phone rang, and again the officers ignored it. Another five minutes, and the telephone rang again, longer this time, as if the

party on the line were urging central to make an extra effort to get the family. Again the detectives remained mute.

Hardly enough time to allow a rapid walker to travel from the corner drug store to the residence elapsed before the police heard the sharp click of a rear window being forced, and a neatly-dress young man stepped briskly from the butler's pantry to the dining-room, making with unerring instinct for the sideboard where the family silver was stored.

At the station house he gave his name as Benjamin Shermerkey, aged twenty-one, and admitted being the perpetrator of the series of burglaries which had cost bereaved Chicagoans thousands of dollars.

His system, he told the police, was a simple one. Each morning he searched the obituary columns in the daily papers. When the names of people living in prosperous sections of the city appeared, he made careful note of the day and hour of the funeral, noting whether services be from the home, church or undertaking establishment.

After allowing a reasonable time for the obsequies, he would ring up the family residence. If anyone answered, he would announce himself as a friend of the deceased and offer condolences. Then, after another interval, he would call again. If he received another answer he would repeat the farce of tendering sympathy, and bide his time.

When his telephone call was finally unanswered, or if his first ring brought no response, he would go to the house, force a window and make off with silverware, jewelry and anything else easily carried. His genteel appearance averted suspicion, even if he were seen leaving a prosperous neighborhood with a bundle.

A speedy trial followed, and residents of Chicago's West Side will have to defer the doubtful pleasure of entertaining Mr. Shermerkey until he has exhausted the hospitality of Joliet Penitentiary.

AN attempt to practice the same specialty was nipped almost in the bud in New York early in 1922. Samuel Deutsch, a four-times offender against the New York burglary statute, was caught red-handed by a young woman who happened to remain in the house to "straighten up" the rooms while the family was attending the burial of a deceased relative at Woodlawn Cemetery.

When discovered, Deutsch told the young lady, "It's all right; I'm the undertaker."

"You're a thief!" replied the courageous girl, and grabbed him, calling loudly for help at the same time. He shook her off, but was captured before he left the block.

"You've got me right," he admitted to the policemen. "I used to look up the obits., and when I seen a bunch of 'em in the same neighborhood, I'd grab me jimmy an' do me stuff."

Had Deutsch used Shermerkey's precaution of telephoning, the chances are he would still be at liberty. As it is, he had been made very comfortable in his old cell at Sing Sing, where he will continue for twenty years, less time off for good behavior.

No less ingenious, and decidedly safer for its perpetrator, was the scheme conceived by Samuel F. Ware, a negro undertaker of Atlanta, Georgia, for mulcting relatives of persons he had buried.

Ware's plan had for its basis the principle of the "Indian gift." He would sell a casket, then steal it back again.

Doctors' and undertakers' mistakes, and often their profits, are usually permanently screened from public view by several cubic feet of earth, and Ware's dereliction might have gone unsuspected indefinitely had it not been for his desire to secure the last split-cent of profit from his perfidy.

An expensive casket might be sold, stolen back and resold two or three times, but after its fourth or fifth interment it began to look shopworn. A little time and expense spent in refinishing it would

have made it a readily merchantable commodity once more, but Ware was averse even to this small overhead chargeable against his profits. Accordingly, he employed an emissary to canvass the smaller funeral supply houses, offering high-grade caskets at prices attractively below the usual wholesale.

One of these traveling salesmen approached the Southern Undertaking Supply & Sales Company, of Jacksonville, and told them a certain Atlanta undertaker was prepared to furnish them a limited number of fine caskets at a price far below that of the manufacturers. So low, indeed, were the prices quoted that the company's secretary became suspicious, and communicated his suspicions to Police Chief Beavers of Atlanta.

Chief Beavers also suspected that all was not as it should be, and detailed two plain-clothes men to investigate these bargain-counter caskets.

South View Cemetery is the principal negro burying ground of Atlanta, and it was here the detectives began their quest. Nothing untoward was apparent. The place presented the usual hodgepodge of expensive monuments and neglected graves common to all negro cemeteries in the South. The wind soughed dolefully through the Lombardy poplars, birds twittered and quarreled in the branches. A pair of negro grave-diggers plied their mournful trade in the unyielding yellow clay.

"We'll just stick around tonight and see what happens," one of the detectives said. The other agreed, and after a cursory inspection of the grave yard and a few formal questions to the grave diggers, the sleuths left.

That night they posted themselves behind the fence, where they could get a full view of several new and flower-decked graves. Toward morning an undertaker's motor casket wagon drove to the cemetery gate, was admitted, and chugged its way to the new section of the grave yard. Three men, armed with

maddocks and spades, alighted, carefully removed the floral pieces from a grave and commenced to dig.

Tense with excitement, the detectives saw the trio unearth an expensive casket, tumble the body back into the grave, replace the earth and flowers, then drive off with the burial case for which several hundred dollars had recently been paid.

Drawing their revolvers, the detectives barred the wagon's passage. The occupants attempted to run them down, but the sight of the officers' guns and shields, coupled with the fact they were white men, dampened their ardor for the exploit. They surrendered.

When the officers inspected their catch they found they had taken Samuel F. Ware, president of a prosperous negro undertaking company, and Thurman Jones and Claude Maddox, grave diggers in the cemetery's employ.

A FEW days after Ware's duplicity became known in Atlanta, the traditional belief that colored people in the South always give cemeteries a wide berth exploded with an impressive bang. Scores of enraged colored residents of the city whose dead had been interred in South View Cemetery, armed with picks, shovels, hoes, rakes—any sort of delving instrument they could find—descended upon the peaceful God's Acre and began a personal investigation of their relatives' graves.

The first grave opened was that of Nancy Joy, one time belle of Auburn Avenue. Her casket was gone. It was found in the next grave to be explored, that of a negro man. Ware had stolen it after burying Nancy and resold it to the man's family. For some reason—perhaps because he had not yet gotten round to it—he had not stolen that particular casket a second time.

As each grave was opened new wailings and moanings arose until it seemed the cemetery was witnessing a gigantic

multiple funeral, each part of which was equipped with a large and demonstrative corps of mourners.

For a time it appeared that the cemetery would be bereft of its dead; but after striving futilely to calm the excited negroes, the cemetery authorities sent for the police, who put an abrupt stop to the impromptu investigation.

Ware, Jones and Maddox were indicted by the Fulton county grand jury shortly afterwards, the indictment charging violation of Section 408 of the state penal code, which prescribes a maximum penalty of ten years' imprisonment for the wanton removal of a body from its grave.

A novel defense was outlined, the contention being that the caskets alleged to be stolen were really rented. The suggestion of this remarkable defense, involving the psychology of the "fine funeral" was made by one of the grave diggers arrested with Ware.

"Ware told us," he said, "that he wasn't stealing those caskets. He said he had just rented them to the families so they could make a big show of having a fine funeral. He said his customers had agreed to let him put the bodies in plain boxes afterward, and take back the expensive caskets so he could rent them to other people."

The caskets were removed under cover of darkness, it was explained, so that nobody would know of Ware's arrangement with his patrons.

There was no indication of such an understanding, however, among the negroes who had thronged South View Cemetery when Ware's operations were being unofficially investigated. Neither was there any evidence of rental agreements when his case came on for trial before the petit jury. A verdict of guilty was quickly arrived at, and the miscreant who had betrayed his patrons' trust received a sentence of the extreme penalty provided by the statute—ten years' imprisonment at hard labor.

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