

# The Black Cat



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## What the Moon Saw.

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**I**N the autumn of 1891 I was advised by my physician to pass a portion of the winter in the South. After much searching I decided upon Asheville, North Carolina, as the most desirable place in which to recuperate. A few days later, accordingly, I started for the South; and when I reached Henry's, which was at that time the railroad terminus, and stepped off the train, my hand was grasped heartily by my old friend, Doctor Mason, who had been advised of my coming, and whom I had not met for some years.

“How long shall you remain here?” was his first question.

“Only to dine, and then go on the stage to Asheville this afternoon,” I replied.

“Oh, come now; stay over one night and I promise you some rare sport after the moon rises.”

Having no plans to be upset by this change, I agreed to spend the night in the quaint but comfortable old hostelry at Henry's.

While at dinner, I learned that my friend Mason was to hold the stakes for a most remarkable wager. It had been made between two young men who were staying in the vicinity for the shooting season. They were Ned French and Albert Turner, who belonged to the class known as “rich men's sons,” and had come to “the land of the sky” for a shooting trip.

The wager in question was the outcome of a heated discussion on personal courage. French had bet one hundred dollars that Turner would not get into an open grave at midnight and drive a nail into the coffin of the departed saint or sinner; and Turner had unhesitatingly accepted the challenge. Mason, as I said, was to be stakeholder, and I, as his friend, was permitted to be a witness. The time appointed for this weird proceeding was midnight, and the affair was to be kept strictly among ourselves.

For a small amount of money, and a larger amount of whisky and tobacco, four negroes, none of whom could be persuaded to undertake the work until that number had been secured, had agreed to open a grave in the forlorn, neglected little churchyard, about a mile from the station.

In the evening I was duly introduced to French and Turner, and we passed the time until the appointed hour by alternately playing billiards and cards and telling ghost stories. Throughout our weirdest tales Turner, however, listened unmoved, even adding a few himself. He was a big, handsome fellow of about five and twenty, and had before the end of his first year at college, where he had been center rush of the football eleven, gained the reputation of being a fearless daredevil, and a total stranger, under any and all circumstances, to that sensation known as fear.

The night was beautifully clear and calm, and the whole village was wrapped in solemn silence when we noiselessly crept out of the hotel on our strange errand. The negroes had gone ahead to do their share of the work. Turner, as he received from the stakeholder the nails and hammer, remarked: "It seems a shame to be forced to disturb the spirit of the departed; but a challenge is a challenge, and I shan't weaken."

Influenced by his light-heartedness, we started off in high spirits. But after the first half mile of our walk we all grew strangely depressed and silent.

With every step the scene became more solemnly impressive and calculated to work on the imagination. The brilliancy of the moonlight on the tall pines made the scattering gravestones on the hillside on our left stand out like miniature ghosts, and the rugged old Blue Ridge peaks in the distance looked hideously grim and threatening. Once the stillness was broken by a frightened rabbit that darted into the road and ran in front of us for several hundred feet, then suddenly turned and, sitting upright, gazed at us curiously for several moments. As we turned off the main road and entered a narrow lane, we were startled by an owl that fluttered from among the pines, hooting ominously as it circled slowly above us. A moment later sounds of weird music floated through the night. By a common impulse we all halted in breathless expectancy. Gazing up the slope at the end

of the lane, we beheld in the crystal moonlight the four darkies sitting about the newly opened grave, chanting with weird solemnity but true jubilee rhythm: —

“Massa’s in de col’, col’ ground.”

We stood entranced until the last wailing cadence had died away; then, shaking off the spell produced by the impressive scene and melody, proceeded to the grave. It was that of a man who had been dead about two years; but the coffin, so the negroes said, was in a good state of preservation. The dark pit yawned cold and dismal as, one by one, we gathered around it.

Turner, wearing his shooting-cap and a long, loose ulster reaching to his feet, stood for a moment on the brink, his eyes measuring the depth with daredevil carelessness. Then, quickly stooping, he lowered himself and called for the hammer and nail. As his head disappeared, every eye followed him with tense excitement. Even the darkies, who, at our approach, had withdrawn to the background, could not restrain themselves, and now rushed forward with glistening eyes and eagerly peered down into the grave. A moment later we heard one, two, three dull, muffled sounds as the nail made its way into the coffin.

“He’s won the bet,” exclaimed half a dozen voices in excited chorus. And the loosening of the intense strain of the last half hour found expression in a tumult of cheers and laughter. The loser of the bet was the first to stoop and reach for Turner’s hand. As the man in the grave, however, remained silent, making no attempt to rise, Dr. Mason, suspecting an attempted joke, laughingly exclaimed that, as no one appeared to claim the stakes, he would donate them to the church whose grounds they had desecrated.

Still the man in the grave neither moved nor spoke.

Then French, with one hand on the brink of the grave, lowered himself, and had no sooner seized Turner’s arm than he shouted: “He’s fainted! Quick, help me pull him out!”

He had hardly spoken when Mason reached down from the opposite side of the grave, and as the two raised the man in their arms we distinctly heard a sharp sound like that of tearing cloth.

They placed the limp figure on the grass, and some one struck a match. The instant that its flickering blaze lit up the rigid, white face we all shrank back in horror, as Mason exclaimed: "He's dead!"

In driving the nail into the coffin, Turner had sent it through the skirt of his long ulster, and on attempting to rise had felt himself held down by an unseen power. The sudden horror of the situation had paralyzed him with a fear that even he could not master. And before thought and reason could come to his assistance his heart had ceased to beat.

