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CONTENTS FOR MARCH, 1934

Number 3

Cover Design	M. Brundage	
<i>Illustrating a scene in "The Black Gargoyle"</i>		
The Black Gargoyle	Hugh B. Cave	274
<i>A tale of goose-flesh horror in the jungles of Borneo</i>		
Gray World	Paul Ernst	290
<i>Gregor awoke to a terrifying gray dawn, and life was terribly changed</i>		
Winged Death	Hazel Heald	299
<i>An eerie story of poisonous African insects</i>		
The Charnel God	Clark Ashton Smith	316
<i>A vivid tale of a ghoulish cult in the temple of the black god</i>		
Thundering Worlds	Edmond Hamilton	331
<i>An Odyssey of interplanetary space</i>		
Remembrance	Mary C. Shaw	350
<i>Verse</i>		
The Clenched Hand	Stuart Strauss	351
<i>An unusual story of a bronze fist and a weird murder</i>		
The Solitary Hunters (conclusion)	David H. Keller	362
<i>A powerful weird novel of living death in the crater of an extinct volcano</i>		
Ghouls of the Sea	J. B. S. Fullilove	378
<i>The story of a ghastly horror that came up out of the sea</i>		
The Nightmare Road	Florence Crow	382
<i>A sensational story of a vampire-infested region in the Hartz Mountains of Germany</i>		
The Late Mourner	Julius Long	386
<i>An odd little story—John Sloan received a shock when he looked upon the face in the coffin</i>		
The Eyrie		389
<i>A chat with the readers</i>		
Why Weird Tales?		394
<i>A reprint editorial from WEIRD TALES of ten years ago</i>		

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Late Mourner

By JULIUS LONG

*John Sloan received a shock when he looked upon the face in the coffin
—an odd little story*

JOHN SLOAN awoke from a sound sleep. He sat up and peered through the gloom of his room at the faded face of his old clock. The hands pointed very nearly to two. He had not intended to nap so long. Two o'clock was the hour set for the funeral rites of his dearest friend. His failure to attend the services would be unpardonable. He would have to hurry.

He left his bed with an ease and agility that surprised him. He was very old, and at times it seemed that every muscle and joint of his body ached and pained him. He rang for Chester, his man. There was no answer, and he repeated the summons with vigor. The house remained silent. Sloan was annoyed by his desertion, but he had no time to investigate. He dressed himself hurriedly and fairly ran down the stairs. Somewhere in the house a clock struck two. The funeral services had probably begun.

He decided to walk to the mortuary, an outpost of the commercial invasion of his once aristocratic neighborhood. He quitted his deserted old house and entered the street. The autumn sun was warm and comforting. Brown and red leaves brushed playfully against his ankles. He was cheered and exhilarated by the October scene. It was many years since he had been able to enjoy the outdoors.

At the same time, he was saddened by the thought of his friend's death. Few of his cronies remained alive. Nearly all the world with which he was familiar had passed on. He had never married. There were not even relatives to dwell in his rambling old house.

His reflection was interrupted by the sight of Tom McGann, the policeman, who had walked the beat for fifteen years. He enjoyed seeing Tom, who was a good-natured and vcluble fellow with a cheery greeting for all.

"Good afternoon, Tom," said Sloan, trying hard to equal the patrolman's usual smile.

Tom did not answer, but walked silently on, as if he had not seen him. Despite his lateness, Sloan paused and stared after the retreating figure. He was astonished and hurt by the snub. He could not account for such behavior. Had someone circulated a scandal about him? Why had Tom passed him by?

The sun lost its bright glow, and the air lost its soothing warmth. The leaves at his feet annoyed him, and October seemed a dismal and inimical month. A sensitive soul, he could not lightly pass off a slight from any human being. He trudged on to the mortuary, dejected and lonely.

OUTSIDE the funeral home there were parked a great many cars. His friend's death was deeply mourned. Sloan was a bit envious. When he died, he reflected sadly, there would be few to attend his funeral.

Two ushers loitered in the doorway. They did not deign to notice Sloan, as he climbed the several steps. He passed meekly between them and entered the building.

To the left was the entrance of the room in which the obsequies were under way. He waded through the thick carpets and stepped inside. No one in the crowded room seemed to notice his appearance. He discovered an empty seat in the rear. He made his way to it, not without treading on the toes of three persons who were sufficiently well bred to betray no notice of his clumsiness.

He settled himself in his chair and regarded the clergyman, who was concluding the obituary. Its details sounded familiar to his ears, and for the first time that afternoon, he tried to visualize the appearance of his departed friend. He

discovered that he could not do so. He had quite forgotten the name and face of the man whom he had regarded as his most intimate companion.

The discovery stunned him. How could he excuse such a stupid lapse of memory? Was he so far gone in his dotage that the most important things in his life could escape his memory? He became frantic, like a schoolboy who has lost his place in his reader and trembles from fear that he will be the next to be called upon.

He tried to recall things that might lead to the recollection of his friend's identity. Where, when and how had he been apprised of his friend's death? How long had he been ill? He plied himself with many such questions, but could answer none of them.

He surveyed the people in the room. They were all known to him. Perhaps he could name his man by the simple process of elimination. One by one, he examined them, but his strategy availed him nothing. His bewilderment was increased by the unaccountable presence of his servants, among whom sat Chester. Why—devil take them!—had they rushed off without him?

He regarded the coffin, which was placed in a front corner of the room. The corpse was not visible. After the services, he would view it and enlighten himself with regard to its identity.

By this time the funeral sermon had been begun, but the minister's words gave no hint as to the name and situation of the departed. Sloan became impatient.

The obsequies dragged to a close. The proprietor of the establishment, with professional suavity, invited the late arrivals to favor the deceased with a last look. Sloan and several others rose and left their seats. Again he tramped on the

toes of his neighbors, who took no notice of his second offense.

He came abreast of the coffin and looked down upon the countenance of the dead man. Enlightenment did not come. The pallid features were familiar, yet so very strange. Had death wrought such changes in his friend that, even now, he would be unable to recognize him?

Dazed, he continued to stare at the lifeless face. Then recognition came. He clutched the coffin for support. He did not attempt to struggle with his suspicions. He knew!

It was his own face that he saw. It was more withered and aged, bloodless and ghastly, yet indisputably his own. It was his body which lay there with its bony hands upon its chest.

With understanding came recollection of the scene which had been effaced from his mind. He lay in his bed. His doctor was authoritatively assuring him that his ailment was insignificant and could not possibly prove fatal. Chester, at his side, looked fearful and worried. Then something choked him. He gasped for breath. The faces of the doctor and Chester were lost in a blur. It must have been then that he had died.

Now he comprehended all. He knew why Tom McGann had not spoken to him, why the ushers had not noticed his arrival. All were oblivious to his presence, because he was without that ugly body which lay in its coffin. No longer would the desires and disappointments of the flesh pain him. Never again would its diseases rack him and try his soul. He was free of it.

It seemed that he was young again and strong and healthy. His thoughts were clear and lucid. Truly he was in the prime of life.

He was aroused from his reverie by the sobbing of Chester and his old housekeeper. He would have made them understand that their tears were out of place, that he was alive and happy.

The mourners filed out slowly. Sloan regarded each appreciatively, but pityingly. The room became empty except for the attendants. The lid of the coffin was closed. Sloan was relieved when he saw the dead face disappear. He hoped that he would be able to forget it.

The coffin was wheeled away. He watched its removal with satisfaction. He lingered a moment in the vacant room, then stole silently out, to a new freedom.