

A Graveyard Tale

Two dark figures, silhouetted in the light from the full moon, flitted from shadow to shadow cast by the monuments and twisted wind-blown trees of the ancient graveyard. They carried the tools of their grim trade, and paused briefly behind an ivy-wreathed tomb to catch their breaths, rasping in the chill air. Their dark clothes rendered them invisible in the sharp moon-spun penumbra of the vainglorious monument to a now-forgotten dignitary, the granite now being reclaimed by the encroaching tendrils of the natural world.

The moon cast a pale, ethereal light over the tombs and headstones and, although the men did not want to be seen as they went about their grisly task, the cemetery was deserted and no human eyes would witness their activities.

"How much further is this grave, then?" Tom, the younger of the grave-robbers asked his companion. "We got miles to drag the body back to the cart." They had left the handcart in the dark street at the side of the cemetery before climbing over the wall.

"You're always moaning, you are," the older man, George, muttered to Tom over his shoulder. "Anyway, it's not a grave, this time."

"What do you mean?" Tom did a stooped scurry to catch up, whilst making sure he didn't drop the shovel carried on his shoulder or the unlit lantern.

"You'll soon see," George replied. "There it is, up ahead."

George pointed ahead with the hand holding his own unlit lantern to the dark shape of the mausoleum looming in front of them.

"I'm not sure about this, George," Tom muttered doubtfully, looking up at the marble edifice, looking closely to make out the crest carved in the stone above the door. It depicted an eagle fighting a winged dragon over the possession of a snake, each with a claw gripped around the serpent's writhing body. "These people look like they got money. It aint like digging up a housemaid or a labourer. If this lot notice a body missing, there'll be a hell of a fuss. I'm not getting my neck stretched over this."

"I'm not keen on going to the gallows either." George looked up at Tom as he lit his lantern. "But you think about it, boy. If we take a body from here, we don't have to disturb the grave. And nobody is ever going to look in the coffin, so no-one will ever know."

Tom was not convinced, and glanced around warily to check that they were not being watched.

"I heard that this one was a beauty, and has only been there for a couple of days,"

George went on. "She died suddenly, as rumours of an affair with some foreign bloke were coming out. The family tried to hush it up, and had a quick funeral, with the minimum of fuss. You better light your lamp – it will be dark in there."

Tom didn't move, chewing his lip as he weighed up his options.

"Come on, Tom – you worry too much." George was beginning to get exasperated with Tom's reluctance. "Look at it this way – would you rather dig down six feet for a mangy corpse, or just take one by levering a door open? Think about it."

Tom shrugged, but couldn't think of an argument to disagree, and bent down to light his lantern. George took that as assent, and held his lantern up closer to trace the door frame. Putting the lantern down, he wedged the blade of the spade between the heavy door and its frame and put his weight against the handle as a lever. The door gave with a groan, and swung open slowly, letting out a gust of chill, musty air.

"Come on, Tom. Bring that lantern. It'll be a piece of cake."

Reluctantly, Tom picked up his lantern and followed George into the cold tomb, casting angular shadows as they passed through the door. The mausoleum seemed larger on the inside than it appeared from the outside, the lamplight failing to penetrate the inky black corners and recesses. The dark here was almost tangible, and Tom worried that if he put his hand outside the light, it could be enveloped and absorbed by the darkness.

Slowly, they moved along, past a series of square recesses cut into the stone from floor to ceiling, just large enough to house a body. Indeed, about half of holes were filled with dusty, cobweb-spun coffins, their brass plaques pitted and corroded with age. George was delighted by this. "Look at this, Tom, my boy," he said triumphantly. "Stiffs straight off the shelf, like buying from the general store. Maybe we'll come back if the good doctors ever need some older specimens. Fresh meat is the order of the day for us tonight, though."

The rows of coffin shelves stopped at the head of steep stone steps leading downwards. George lifted his lamp up in front of him, peering to see where they led. "I really don't like this, George." Tom wavered behind him, looking around again to try to dispel that clinging sensation that they were being followed.

"The steps don't go down too far," George answered. "I can just make out a doorway at the bottom. That's where our young lady must be laid."

George descended slowly, breath visible in the chill air, carefully placing his feet on each stone step, slippery with damp.

Tom glanced behind again, briefly considering whether he would rather run past the dark, decaying coffins and into the graveyard alone, or follow George down the steps and through the arched doorway. He chose the latter, also taking care on the steps, trying not to be distracted by his own elongated and distorted shadow playing along the rough hewn stones of the walls and ceilings in this subterranean part of the tomb. Through the archway, the room opened out into a semi-circular chamber with a stone vaulted roof. More dark recesses for coffins lined the perimeter walls, each framed in the finest Italian marble. This was obviously the place of interment for the more wealthy and favoured members of the family. In the centre of the semi-circle, was an ornate marble pedestal, carved with the dragon and eagle insignias that they had noticed on the outside of the mausoleum. Upon this pedestal, there rested a highly polished mahogany coffin, its brass handles gleaming.

"Look at this, Thomas, my boy," George announced with a grin. "They put it on a plate for us."

Tom shone his lantern briefly around the edge of the chamber, to convince himself that there was no other living person in the room. Of course, the light could not penetrate down the coffin recesses, which reminded him of missing teeth in a skull's grin.

"Come on, son. Give me a hand." George beckoned Tom over to the mahogany coffin. Tom came over and stood uncertainly on the opposite side of the coffin to George.

"Put your stuff down," George instructed. "We need to ease off the coffin lid, but I don't want to damage it."

Tom put his lantern and spade down on the tiled floor and, looking to George for reassurance, put the heels of both hands against the coffin lid. Holding his lantern in one hand, George pushed his other hand against the lid. "Come on, son – push and lift."

After slight resistance, the coffin lid gave and slid part of the way across, revealing the scarlet silk lining. Tom braced himself for the sight of the corpse, then lifted the

coffin lid off and placed it on the floor. George raised his lantern to cast light on her face.

“My God,” breathed Tom. “She’s wonderful.”

Tom and George leaned over the body of the young woman, marvelling at her beauty, still preserved after death.

“She’s in near perfect condition,” agreed George. “The doctors will pay a handsome price for this one.”

She was clad, in a full-length pearl-white silk dress, the shine of the material accentuating her slender arms and legs, and the gentle curves of her slim body. A white lace head-dress was pinned into her long flowing jet-black hair, and her high cheek bones seem to have been sculpted in alabaster, her skin unblemished in death. Tom and George gazed in awe.

Too late, did they see the eyes snap open, the pupils like large black opals, inviting, mesmerising. Too late, did they notice the smile spread across her crimson lips, revealing perfectly white teeth; only, the canines were longer and sharper than any normal human. It was too late, because the beautiful corpse had gripped them, one in each hand by the back of the neck, sharp talons piercing the skin. There was no chance of escape, even if they had not been too terrified to move.

“How nice – room service” she hissed, before she started to feast.

And the other creatures emerged from the dark shadows, eagerly and hungrily awaiting their turn.

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