

Alas, Poor Yorick  
THE STORY OF THE AMERICAN FUNERAL  
by

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ALAS, POOR YORICK

Foreword

I come from a family whose vocation for three generations has been to embalm and bury the dead. My grandfather was called a funeral director; my father an undertaker; and I reluctantly find myself being called a mortician. Since ~~we~~ <sup>such</sup> undertakers are great fellows for coining new words to express the Language of the Dead, <sup>that</sup> I believe I can show you that the <sup>so-called</sup> Dead Language has surprising life and vigor...

Grandpa used to stoically embalm the corpse in the back room of his furniture <sup>and hardware</sup> ~~store~~ store, place it in a coffin, and cart it to the grave-yard in a horse-drawn hearse. Father, bowing to progress, more reverently used to embalm the remains in the morgue of his funeral parlor, place it (or rather, I suppose, them) in a casket, and with the timely aid of six pallbearers, transport them to the cemetery in a horse-drawn and later a motor hearse. The march of time has found me ~~daintily~~ preparing the body in the mortuary of my funeral home, exhibiting it in the funeral chapel, and, with the assistance of escorts, likewise transporting it to the cemetery in a motor hearse.

You will observe that the only word the three of us have left in common is hearse. Some of the more modern-minded of my colleagues have been trying to persuade me that I should abandon even this softened word usage and henceforth more daintily prepare my patients or cases in a preparation-room, store them in a slumber-room, exhibit them in a slumber-cot in a chapel, and finally, with the aid of attendants, transport them to the cloister or memorial-park in a funeral car or casket-coach. This would presumably completely remove all the sting--if not all the distinction--from man's last drama... The worthy purpose behind all this nicety of language seems to be twofold: to avoid as much as possible the sorrowful connotations associated with death and burial, and perchance, at the same time, to somehow elevate the pickling profession. I concede that both points are debatable...

Some of the more advanced students of the semantics of my trade would call me a mortuary consultant or funeral counselor. However, within the foreseeable future I do not think I shall budge beyond mortician. I'm stubborn that way... I must also confess that few persons besides a fellow mortician would ever dream of calling me anything but <sup>an</sup> undertaker. I find I've got a kind of sentimental hankering for it myself...

Mortician is not new, however. In his The American Language H. L. Mencken has arrayed the evidence that it first blossomed in American along about 1895, but did not really reach its fullest bloom until 1917. However, if it was the desire of the grammarians among my colleagues to find a soothing euphemism for the comparatively inoffensive word undertaker, I think they could ~~have~~ scarcely <sup>have</sup> made an unhappier choice than mortician. The word, to my mind, somehow conjures up a picture of a medieval dealer in death moving mysteriously along a damp stone passageway lined with rows of grinning skulls. But it looks like I'm stuck with it...

I propose in this book to tell you about my job as a small-town undertaker; about some of my notions and ideas concerning my trade; about some of the people I have dealt with, both living and dead; about some of my experiences--and occasional adventures--in one of the oldest professions in the world. Why am I writing this book?

There are a number of reasons: the idea is <sup>rather</sup> intriguing because it's never been done before; the profession is crowded with priceless untold stories; and, if a tiny miracle happens, I might even make some money and thus go trout fishing more often in Ontario... But I think my main reason is to help brush away some of the ancient cobwebs that obscure my trade; to dispel some of the fog and mystery and damp air of mumbo-jumbo and black magic that surrounds it--<sup>and</sup> so much of which is due to a juvenile attitude on the part of some of my fellow undertakers

themselves. I want to widen the doors of my funeral home and let the clean winds of truth blow through it and, perchance, throughout my profession. After all, there is no more mystery about Death than there is about Life—and no less. One appears to me to be as inevitable as the other. And it is surely as adult to face the facts of one as the other... So take your places, ladies and gentlemen. Pallbearers will please occupy the cars forward. And hold your hats!

## Chapter I

### My Neck of the Woods

The iron-mining town of Chippewa lies on the Upper Peninsula of Michigan near the south shore of the earth's largest inland sea, Lake Superior. The Peninsula is a wild, harsh and broken land, breath-taking in its beauty, compounded of many rocky hills and swamps and trees and lakes and endless waterways. The region contains some of the oldest rocks found on earth, forming a part of the great pre-Cambrian shield of North America. Nearly every mile of it bears the mute scars of the grinding long-ago when giant glaciers covered the land.

The town of Chippewa lies in a broad loamy valley between chains of squat, bald iron bluffs. Before the white man came one of the main Indian trails moving overland from the lower Great Lakes region to the headwaters of the Mississippi and the plains beyond passed just north of Chippewa. Upon the naked bluffs of the town, once covered with evergreens, the towering shaft houses of the iron mines reach up toward the sky, sometimes in the deceptive shadows of dusk looking like the fortified watchtowers of some embattled village.

Rich iron-ore deposits had been discovered near the town site before the Civil War, and there had been some early ill-fated and fumbling attempts at mining. But it was not until the War that dozens of adventurous little bands descended upon the town in search of quick fortunes. These first restless groups believed that the richer deposits lay near the surface, and men tortured themselves to crippled death quarrying out the great pieces of hard ore from the first pits. Stories are still told of the terrible labors of these early miners, of their crude equipment, and of the patient oxen which were used to drag the huge slabs of iron ore from the pits until their feet were too sore for further service, when they were killed and eaten by the hungry miners.

After years of wild, gouging, slashing mining and claim jumping by these hardy little groups, a large steel corporation came to the blustering mining camp of Chippewa, surveyed, drilled, calculated--discovering at last that much richer iron deposits lay far underground--and then literally bought the town, mineral rights and all.

Gradually a measure of respectability was brought to the roaring mining camp of Chippewa with the advent of the new Chippewa Ore Company, lusty corporate offspring of a great steel corporation, with its head offices in the distant state of Delaware. Churches began to vie with the saloons--at least in number if not in attendance... But the town has never lost its air of being a mining camp. This is evidenced by the rows of frame clapboard buildings with their false second stories that still stand along the main street; by the stout, white-washed log cabins that continue to house the families of miners within a block of the new city hall; by the yawning pits of deserted miners; and by the haphazard, winding streets of the town, which are usually narrow, but which sometimes capriciously swell out into brief and pregnant stretches of inordinately broad hematite boulevards.

Points of the compass mean little in Chippewa. Two families might live on the same street, and one live on North Oak Street and the other on West Oak. Some of the oldest settlers, old miners and their wives, persuasively declare that the town was laid out late on Christmas Eve by a drunken Scotch engineer during a howling blizzard, and that the only instrument he carried was a smoking lantern, while his lurching assistant carried a jug...

During each successive wave of immigration to the United States, a new racial group was brought to the town, attracted mainly by ready employment in the mines. Each group brought its own religious dogmas, its own parsons and

priests and medicine men, its own badges and buttons, its secret lodges and grips and mysterious rituals; until, finally, God was divinely butchered and divided up among no less than a score of churches, each of which offered its stout little band of followers the one true ladder to heaven.

"Eet's getting so bad," sighed the late lamented LaPointe, who ran the Jump-on-Top Saloon, "that pretty soon the ol' town she have one church for every goldamn saloon."

The town finally got a new brick high school, a stone firehouse and city hall, a frame ski and snowshoe club, and a sandstone Carnegie library. Then the mining company built a modern brick hospital and there was even talk of a Y.M.C.A. The solid citizens formed luncheon clubs and sang cheery songs of fellowship and regarded with deep satisfaction the results of their efforts to make Chippewa like every other small town in America. Even the tourists were discovering it...

But after all Chippewa is still a mining camp, in which one gradually grows used to hearing the dishes rattle in the cupboard following the deep shuddering thuds of dynamite blasts in the mines far underground--blasts which sometimes sound as though some trapped and maddened giant were insistently pounding on the very ceiling of Hell... In the gaunt frame boardinghouses the menus, when there are any, are still written in foreign languages. And a block from Main Street you can boil in the rugged, luxurious hell of a Finnish steam-bath or "sauna" with a stalwart Finn to beat you with a wet broom of cedar switches to make you sweat--or else to frantically retreat in sheer self-defense.

The first Finnish settlers came to Chippewa in the 80's, but it was in the 90's and at the turn of the century that they arrived in the town and peninsula in such force that they soon became the largest racial group in the entire region.

Most of them had left the little grand duchy of Finland because of the growing cruelty of a diseased and dying Russian empire, and while many of them were attracted by work in the mines, an even greater attraction was the nostalgic similarity of the peninsula to their native Finland. For these silent, patient, dogged Finnish immigrants loved nature and the soil as much as they loved freedom. And all these things were offered to them in that far northern segment of sprawling America, the upper peninsula of Michigan.

There were also Cornishmen from the tin mines of their native country, who remembered to bring with them their traditional meat pies or "pasties" but invariably forgot their "h's..." There were droves of tall, blue-eyed Swedes and Norwegians; a considerable number of Italians; followed in lesser numbers by the French, largely from Canada, and the ubiquitous Irish, who were usually railroaders, policemen, blacksmiths, machinists, or firemen at the mine boilers--and always politicians. There there were a few Scots and Germans, who were mostly tradesmen and saloonkeepers, and rarely worked down in the mines. And, lastly, there were the two clothiers whose race was none of these, Leopold and Suss, those inevitable representatives of the real pioneers of the earth. They ran the large frame Miners' Store across the square from the Company's bank from which, for many years, they conducted what seemed to be an endless fire sale...

Today the children and grandchildren of these hardy immigrants are the Peninsula's miners, farmers, loggers, sailors, fishermen and carpenters; businessmen, bankers, clergymen and teachers; bakers, tavern-keepers, cab drivers--and even undertakers...

A half-dozen streets converge helter-skelter into the Chippewa town square. In the center stands a tall bronzed statue of an Ojibway Indian chief, his bow



and arrow held ready at his side, one hand shading his eyes and peering into the West, as though searching for some last member of his lost tribe that once roamed and hunted in the somber loneliness of the surrounding hills and forests until at last they had faded and fell away before the avid digging and restless prying of the ore-crazed whites. But the ancient chief peers in vain. To a man the townspeople irreverently call him "Chief Booze-in-the-Face." However, in the Ojibway "Nagamon," the tribal lament, the lingering survivors of his tribe touch bitterly upon the early years of ruthless mining:

Anamakamig dash  
Maiagwed jaganash,  
Anokewag,  
Biwabikokeweg,  
Anonigosiwag;  
Kitchimokomanag  
Mamigewag.

(In the bowels of the earth  
The foreign devils are working.  
They are gathering our metals,  
They are the hired toilers;  
While the big knives (Americans)  
They are our despoilers.)

\* \* \*

My grandfather, Sven Carlson, came to Chippewa from Sweden in 18\_\_\_. He was then \_\_\_\_\_ years old. Having a little more money than most of his fellow migrants, he managed to avoid the iron mines and soon started a modest furniture and hardware store. In due course he met and married my grandmother, joined the local Swedish church, and settled down to be a good citizen of Chippewa. It was not long before he found that being a good church-goer was not an unmixed blessing... One day he was visited at his new store by a delegation composed of his pastor and the elders of the church. Snuff was exchanged, along with sage observations about the weather. "Ahem!" the pastor said, clearing his throat. The occasion

of their visit was so momentous that they even spoke in Swedish. What did they want? They wanted Grandpa to take on the task of burying the congregation's dead! Grandpa squealed in horror and tugged on his long moustaches.

"No, no," he dolefully protested. "I've never even touched a dead person. I wouldn't know what to do... I don't know how..."

"Neither do we," the elders firmly replied. "And we don't even know where to order the coffins and other fixings--and you got 'em right there in your catalogues. See?" they pointed. "Someone's got to do it."

Grandpa was trapped--and their logic probably goes far to explain why so many small-town furniture and hardware dealers in America drifted so naturally into undertaking as a sideline. They simply had a store and the catalogues and knew the travelling salesmen... At any rate it explains why Grandpa reluctantly became an undertaker. He shurged and sighed and got out the tall step-ladder and the paint pot, climbed up to his new sign and added to the legend: "S. Carlson--Furniture and Hardware" these words: "Funeral Director." And it surely explains why Father in turn became an undertaker, finally abandoning the furniture and hardware part, and why I, since my late teens--except for a four year hitch in the Navy--have told the census takers I was a mortician. Whether a member of the fourth generation will be around to take over the old shop when I falter is beginning to look rather dubious from this corner, as I'm in my mid-thirties and still a bachelor.

The line will form on the right girls...

## Chapter 2

### THE QUICK AND THE DEAD

The art of embalming the human body is nearly as old as recorded history itself. There is evidence that the practice flourished among the ancient Assyrians, Scythians and Persians. To the early Egyptians, however, goes the credit for inventing the process--probably sometime before 4000 B.C.--and for bringing the art to its fullest flower among all ancient peoples who practiced embalming.

When Mummy takes Junior to look at a mummy in a museum on Free Day they are merely viewing the handiwork of an ancient embalmer who made good. The Egyptian embalmers should have been good because most of them devoted their lives to learning their trade. Since they followed their art for some forty-seven centuries, during which it is estimated they embalmed nearly a billion bodies, they certainly had plenty of time and material for practice. In Egypt embalming was a priestly function and was jealously guarded from inroads by the laity.

Why did the Egyptians go to such elaborate lengths to preserve their dead? There seems to be at least two reasons. First, their burial rituals took such a ghastly long time. Following the months spent in pickling their man--the full treatment took about 70 days--apparently a macabre affection would spring up between embalmer and his mummy because it was not unusual for the embalmed body to be kept lying around for additional months on exhibition. I shudder to think of being an undertaker in those days... The mummy was even carted out at entertainments--evidently as a sobering reminder to the guests of the transient lot of mankind and, perhaps, to also remind them of the lateness of the hour... I must look more closely into this last possibility...

The second reason for so resolutely preserving the corpse was because of the prevailing religious notion in ancient Egypt that the body itself harbored the spirit of the deceased, and that if the body were destroyed the spirit would be

obliged to hover about all alone in poolrooms and on park benches... This is also the reason why the Egyptians left such copious stores of bran flakes, wines and the like handy to the mummy--in case it should feel the need of a little roughage or want to go on a quiet midnight jag.

This is how a good journeyman Egyptian embalmer did his stuff: First he removed the intestines and the brains and proceeded to fill these cavities with a mixture of balsamic herbs, myrrh, cassia, etc. There is evidence that religious rites accompanied the various steps of this embalming ceremony. Each embalmer had his own secret formula which he guarded as jealously as Grandma used to guard her recipe for chili sauce or Crosse & Blackwell or the Angostura people do their splendid concoctions in our day, only surrendering the secret at death to some chosen protege, usually some member of his family... But I see we haven't finished preparing our mummy yet... Next our ancient embalmer injected a complicated balsamic solution into the arteries and other vessels--which incidently shows a profound knowledge of the circulatory system thousands of years before the circulation of the blood was again "discovered" by William Harvey in 1616. Then he filled the cavities of the trunk with an artful conglomeration of aromatic spices and saline and bituminous stuffs. Then he soaked yards of winding cloths in the same stuff, to which was added certain gums and resins, deftly wound up his man and--if he was sensible--lit an Egyptian Diety and stepped across the street to Joe's for a couple of quick ones...

With the crumbling of their civilization the Egyptians abandoned their ancient embalming art, along about 700 A.D. I have no information whether this was also partly due to a strike among the makers of winding cloths or possibly the gradual seepgge of the radical Christian notion of the divisibility of the spirit and the body, with its accent on the corruptibility of the latter... It

is estimated that there are still millions of mummies concealed in <sup>the shifting sands of</sup> Egypt, for relatively few of them rated a pyramid or even a mummy case. In the brief pauses between modern wars, expeditions are still turning up mummies at a great rate. Some of them, especially the big shots, show a remarkable state of preservation. Mummies have been found with wistful smiles still playing around their lips, and with the palms and soles of the feet still soft and elastic--a comforting thought. Other millions will probably still be there, soft soles and all, when you and I are gone, Maggie...

Other ancients practiced embalming, as I have observed, but none of them quite so successfully as the Egyptians. Apparently the latter's success was due mainly to the stuff they used--although Egypt's dry climate probably helped a lot. The Persians used wax; the Assyrians honey; and the ancient Jews, aloe and spices. Alexander the Great got the double treatment: A Persian and Assyrian embalmer teamed up on him. But since the mummies of these non-Egyptian ancients, including that of Alexander, are mostly noticeable by their absence, the embalming "Oscar" must clearly go to the Egyptians...

The old Greeks and Romans practiced cremation of their dead although there is evidence of the later overlapping of earth and tomb burials. But the Christians were the ones who brought earth burial into its greatest vogue, and one from which it seems not readily to be displaced despite all the modern economic and hygienic arguments to the contrary. While their precise embalming methods are lost in the swampy mists of history, some of the early Christian embalmers made their corpses last mighty long. Mighty long, indeed... It seems that a remarkable job was done on Edward I, who was buried in Westminster Abbey in 1307, and found in 1770 still doing pretty well. And the chap that worked on King Canute was no slouch either. Canute, you will remember, was the modest

fellow who once stood on the beach and hurled a command at the sea for the tide to stand still. He died of acute disappointment in 1335. Yet in 1776 some prowling workmen in Westminster Cathedral stumbled over old Canute looking just as chipper and sea-defiant as the day he was buried.

In America the Civil War gave us the greatest impetus to modern embalming practices. Prior to that even the most distinguished corpses were literally kept on ice until they were buried. However, it was only with the turn of the century that embalming of all bodies became the common practice. I'll have some more to say about that later on in this book.

Brrr...

The latest embalming method common in the United States is the injection of several gallons of embalming fluid into a main artery, often the femoral. At the same time a vein is opened, and the progress of the embalming solution serves to clear the body of blood at the same time that it penetrates to the remotest tissue cells. Then a large hollow needle is used to aspirate the remaining gases and fluids from the trunk cavities. This is important, I have learned from sad experience, unless you prefer to risk having an emphatic burp to enliven your burial services... In some cases the back and trunk walls may be injected with the same solution by a large hypodermic needle. A solution containing a minimum per cent of formaldehyde is required by most state laws, the formula also containing alcohol, salts, dyes and certain agents to aid penetration and to delay dehydration. Quick, Watson, the needle...

The first American embalmers simply added the embalming fluid to the bloodstream without draining the blood. If you can imagine how bloated and monstrous a person would look, say, after drinking three gallons of beer and with no place to go, you can also imagine some of the startling cosmetic effects these early embalmers achieved. The trick of replacing the blood by the embalming solution was discovered quite by accident--when a vein burst one day under the added pressure of the embalming fluid. At that historic moment we embalmers ceased to be picklers and became artistes...

There is considerable modern agitation for the universal revival of cremation--I mean, outside the trade journals of us morticians! There are probably only about 200 crematories in the country today, mostly private, against many thousands of funeral homes--so cremation is still not reaching epidemic proportions. The first U. S. crematory was established in 1876 by Dr. F. Julius Moyné at Washington, Pennsylvania, and to one Baron de Palm goes the dubious

distinction--not the palm!--of being the first corpse in America to be officially fried... Modern crematory furnaces accommodate the casket and all. Melted metals are drawn off, the rest extracted by magnets, and in a few hours one can be presented with refined ashes of the late departed--together with the bill for services rendered...

I speak of the revival of cremation because the practice is believed to be nearly as venerable as earth burial itself. Even the word "bonfire" means literally bone fire. Any day you feel in a ghoulish mood you can still visit your favorite museum and brood over a burial urn containing the ashes of an ancient Etruscan. Undoubtedly most early cremations were associated with some religious notion of purification by fire... The proponents of modern cremation argue mainly on economic and health grounds. The more mathematical of them point out that if it is true that only about 4000 corpses can be decently crowded into an acre of ground, and further assuming a mortality rate of 15 per 1000 population, then nearly four acres per 1,000,000 population are required annually for ground burials. In other words, they point out, the cemeteries of greater New York are being filled at the rate of over 20 acres per year. Put that way, the thought is kind of staggering.

Modern morticians have perfected elaborate organizations, complete with conventions, lobbies, trade journals, group insurance, codes of ethics, auditing services, inions, and all of the modern paraphernalis of any high-pressure, well-organized American minority group. Our motto is always "Better Service." And are we on our toes? Take the plushiest and most exclusive of these organizations, the National Selected Morticians, Inc. The N.S.M. is undoubtedly the Union League Club of all organized picklers. Listen to this forward-looking quotation from one of its recent rules relating to, of all things, atomic funerals:



"Remains that are not too highly radioactive may be viewed by the public if visitors file quickly past the casket instead of standing before it for any appreciable time."

This is the most soaring note of optimism I have heard anywhere since Hiroshima. For the implication is plain that after Atomic War I, in the opinion of the master-minds of NSM, we undertakers will still be soft-shoeing around, still doing business at the same old stand. And there'll even be a few mourners left. I'm relieved no end... However, there's one thing that may perplex one a little--just how is our atomic embalmer going to get close enough to his radioactive corpse to go into his act? Must embalmers now get measured for a nifty double breasted suit made of lead? Not a bit! The resourceful N.S.M. has a ready answer for that one, too. It simply proposes that a crew of embalmers take turns working on the radioactive corpse. The assembly line idea, see. And think of all the extra employment it'll give us poor embalmers.

Personally I am of the opinion that when we get to that stage there'll be damn few embalmers left around to work on anybody. So, while there's a little time left, let's get on with our first funeral...

*Incomplete*

JUST A STONE'S THROW

The phone rang insistently. I groped in the dark for the night table.

"Hello," I sleepily muttered.

"Is dis you?" a voice challenged me over the wire.

"Yes," I confessed, not wishing to engage in any metaphysical discussion at that hour of the night.

"This is Clifford Balsam--you remember me, doncha? You buried my ol' man three years ago."

"Yes," I answered, also remembering that there was a substantial unpaid balance remaining on the funeral bill.

"Well, I got word tonight that my Uncle Clifford--that's my rich uncle--up an' died over at Nestoria. C'n you take care of him--the funeral, I mean?" Nestoria was a small logging community some sixty miles west of Chippewa--via some of the worst roads in Michigan. "Can ya?" the bereaved Balsam plaintively repeated.

"Can't you make arrangements at the other end?" I sparred, trying to think of a legitimate reason for refusing the case.

"They ain't no other," Balsam came back. "You know damn well they ain't no undertakers up dere in the woods. Don't you worry about gettin' paid," he cagily continued, appealing to my cupidity, "because ol' uncle Cliff's got lots of dough--an' I was his favorite nephew. I'll take care of the bill an' of our other little balance right after the funeral, see."

"Where do I call for the body?" I wearily surrendered, rolling up out of bed and feeling for my slippers.

"Jest go to the station agent at Nestoria," Balsam instructed me. "Fella by the name of Eddy. He's the coroner, too, the sheriff tole me... Lives by the depot. Uncle Cliff's place is just a stone's throw from the depot."

"I'll call you when I get back with the body," I said.

"Okay, an' then I'll come down an' pick out a swell funeral," Balsam said. "Ol' Uncle Cliff deserves the best."

I shall not recount the long moonlit ride to Nestoria over the frozen bumpy roads--it was lat February. As a matter of fact I enjoyed driving through the night, rushigg down the rolling corridor of roads past the walls of tall evergreens, their mounds of dotted snow gleaming bluely in the moonlight... Fortunately, I had only one blowout.

It was daylight when I arrived at the "loop" of Nestoria. This consisted of the main railroad track, a rusty siding upon which stood a partially loaded gondola car of spruce pulpwood, and the traditional section-house red depot and dwelling house of the station agent, complete with the geraniums in old tomatoe cans. I looked up and down the track for Uncle Cliff's place which his nephew had assurred me was only a stone's throw from there. "David must have been hurling the stone at Goliath," I grimly concluded, failing to spy another human habitation within a mile in either direction. Then I saw a light appear in the window of the station agent's house and wearily headed that way.

"Ol' Man Balasm's place?" the station agent--coroner repeated, hitching up his suspenders. "Hm, I ah't laid eyes on the ol' duffer near to a year. Didn't even know he was sick... All I know is his shack is somewhere off yonder in there. He waved his arm vaguely in the direction of the woods north of the tracks. "I can't go in with you today. Got to tend to the telegraph. Sorry. You kin bring him out. Won't you come in an' have a cup of coffee?"

"Thanks," I said, ear/gerly lunging over the thresh/old

During the ritual of coffee the station agent--Matt Eddy was his name--told me that two Finnish deckers would shortly be on hand to finish loading the gondola outside. "They live in a shack in that way, too. They'll probably be able to tell you where to find old Balsam's place. Quite a soak, that old Balsam," he reminisced. "Quite a soak..."

Urho and Matti--the two Finnish loggers--appeared while I was on my third cup of coffee. Matt Eddy called them into his kitchen and put on a new pot of coffee, the universal brew of Michigan's upper peninsula.

It developed that old Balsam's shack was "six-eight mile" in the woods due north of Nestoria. Would they take me in there? They would, provided I'd pay them for the time they would lose loading their car of pulpwood.

"What road do we drive on?" I asked.

"Dere's no roads dat place," Urho answered. "Only vay you get dat place is take da snow-s'oe."

Snowshoes! I groped for another cup of coffee. Of course I could have chucked the whole thing and turned back, but my stubborn Swedish phelmgm or ire or something was getting aroused. I'd see the damn thing through now if I had to walk in on my hands... "Where can we get a toboggan and an extra pair of snowshoes for me?" I asked.

"You can use my shoes," the friendly station agent offered. "The toboggan's only eight feet long. Better take some food with you, too. Never can tell just how long you will be..."

I went out and got my embalming kit, and the carrying basket, accepted the bag of food from the station agent, lashed the whole business to the toboggan. In a few minutes Urho, Matti and I started into the woods for the body of old Cliff Balsam--"jest a stone's throw from the depot."

"Have a good time," the station master shouted from his kitchen door.

We stopped at the shack of Urho and Matti on the way--they were only about two miles from the depot--and it was noon before we straggled out of the woods and into the clearing before old Balsam's shack.

I wearily threw off the chaffing and unaccustomed snowshoes and, walking curiously bowlegged, headed for the door of the shack. Urho and Matti, obviously reluctant to enter a house of the dead, hovered together near the outhouse some thirty paces away, uttering in Finnish. I opened the door.

"Hm..." I said, entering the disordered place.

Old Clifford Balsam was seated at his kitchen table, his head on his arms, his arms on the table, quite dead. The place was bitterly cold. I tried to move the body. Frozen stiff. He must have been dead for at least three days. I went to the door.

"Bring in some water and wood--lots of both," I called to Urho and Matti, who were still keeping their vigil by the outhouse.

There were a half-dozen or more whiskey bottles scattered about the camp--one in the bunk; several on the floor; and an overturned and partially filled ~~mm~~ bottle on the table near the body. Old Balsam had gone out in a blaze of alcoholic glory... Prowling further, I discovered three full fifths of Old Cordwood whiskey on the oilcloth shelf over the table. "Hm," I said, removing the cork from one of them. I again went ~~mm~~ to the door. Urho and Matti had not moved from the outhouse.

"What in hell's the matter?" I shouted. "C'mon in."

"'Fraid for dead mans," Urho, the spokesman, muttered.

I held up the bottle of whiskey in the February sunshine--and marvelled to see fear dissipate so rapidly from our segment of the earth. I was nearly trampled in the rush...

While Urho and Matti started roaring fires in both stoves, I hustled around to prepare to embalm my man. First, of course, we'd have to thaw him out--that is, after we thawed ourselves out. I found three frozen lemons in the cupboard--and in ten minutes I had crammed two hot whiskies apiece down the throats of my laboratory assistants and their chief. In ten minutes more I was venturing my first Finnish song with Urho and Matti, and after the next hot drink they helped me move the contorted body of ~~our~~ frozen friend over by the red-hot heating stove--chair and all--the better to thaw it; my dears...

After the first bottle was gone, we decided it would be well to eat. Urho and Matti prepared the meal while I--getting into the spirit of the thing--mixed up another batch of hot whiskies. After our lunch I suggested that we should play a game of cards.

"We have to put in the time some way till the old man thaws out an' I can embalm him," I carefully explained. "Do you boys play smear?--quarter a game and a quarter a set?"

"Oh, li'l bit," Hrho modestly admitted, so after another hot drink we sat down to a quiet game of smear. Darkness was falling when I discovered that I was out eight seventy-five! This discovery was punctuated by a thud from the direction of the heating stove. We glanced up from our game. Old Balsam had thawed out and subsided to the floor. Cards in hand I got up and signalled my companions to do likewise. "Gentlemen," I reverently intoned, "respect for the dead dictates that we arise and play the rest of this hand standin' up."

Urho ~~and~~ made supper and opened the last bottle of whiskey while Matti and I mixed the embalming solution with water and proceeded to embalm the body. I concentrated on my work--only pausing for two hot whiskies--and by the time supper was ready I had old Uncle Cliff embalmed and in his basket, lashed to the toboggan out in the moonlight. During supper we sang songs and finished the whiskey--and it was with genuine regret that we blew out the light, closed the door, adjusted our snowshoe harnesses, and started back over our winding moonlit trail. As we threaded our way through the tall balsam's and spruces, the toboggan squealing on the frosty snow behind us, Matti and Urho sang Finnish songs, augmented by my wavering tenor...

## THE PROFESSIONAL WIDOW

The story of the status of widows is one of the saddest in the history of civilization," William Sumner wrote in his "Folkways." From the illustrations he gives I think he may have something there. On the Fiji Islands the widow was strangled on her husband's grave and buried with him. It seems she was obliged to accompany and wait upon his ghost in the nether world. On the other hand the primitive Indian Aryans initiated a dubious improvement--they simply lit a fire and burned their widows...

In more enlightened communities the widow was somewhat better off. They settled by shaving her head or forbidding her to re-marry or disinheriting her or merely starving her--all calculated to purge her of the "blame" for her husband's death. She was nearly everywhere regarded as a creature of ill-omen. Even the ancient Greeks and Romans frowned on the remarriage of widows, and Roman tombstones have been found upon which was graven this laudatory legend: "Wife of one husband." And did you know that the charivari sprang up in the Middle Ages to express the noisy disapproval of the neighbors when a lonely widow dared to snag a new husband?

The public attitude toward the remarriage of widows in any given time and place seems largely shaped by two factors: the current religious concepts of the "other world" and the supply of women. In places where the dead are stowed away with food, safety razor and a change of underwear--thus being endowed with conscious life--and are presumably able to enjoy the pangs of jealousy, widows have had no picnic. Where concern after death--where concern exists at all--is with the spirit and not its shell, widows fare much better. However, in communities where there are not enough ladies to go around, the laddie-bucks generally see to it that even the most stringent rules are relaxed, even though the outraged clergy and priestcraft may visualize the late husband jealously spinning and growling in his grave...



Whatever it is that fluctuates the market in widows, the climate must be ideal for them here in the United States. For America is indubitably the mecca of the widow. Here she has come a long way from her sisters who used to be strangled on the Fiji's. Nowhere on earth does she enjoy such prestige and <sup>or</sup>auth~~ority~~ity. Learned articles have been written, complete with charts and graphs, showing how much of the wealth of the nation she owns or controls. And she may remarry as soon and as often as she damn well pleases. Pictures of her sixth marriage, this time to Preston Todd III, Yale '08, are not uncommon in our society pages. I speak not of grass widows, though the growing prevalence of this latter clan in our commonwealth has undoubtedly done much to silence our tongue-clucking over the remarriage of the real McCoy...

Naturally, in my work I am obliged to traffic considerably with widows. My heart goes out to them. For our Lake Superior variety do not generally get to remarry rich old Yale grads to the accompaniment of exploding flash bulbs. No. They are more likely obliged to content themselves with marrying another miner. Their lot is not easy. Their cups runneth not over. Only their wash tubs runneth over with red from their husband's ore-stained underwear...

In the balance of this seminar I propose to discuss not the ordinary widow, no matter how many times she may remarry, but a special phenomenon among widows, and one which seems so far to have escaped the attention of the social essayists of America. I speak of the Professional Widow... What manner of woman is she? Come with me to the sunny warmth of my funeral home and I will try to display her to you in all of her native splendor...

\* \* \*

~~THE PROFESSIONAL WIDOW~~

We were upstairs <sup>prowling around</sup> in the casket display room. "What did you have in mind, Mrs. Wilson?" I softly suggested. ~~after we had prowled the place for nearly an hour~~

"Oh dear me--it's so hard to even think of such a thing," she said, blinking her grief-swollen eyes. "You know, ~~Ø~~ my Bertsie--I always called him Bertsie--it doesn't seem possible <sup>that</sup> he's gone--my Bertram always hated ostentation and show. So I think we ought to make it as simple as possible. He--he wasn't a bit like my third husband--so quiet and such a fine character. Bertram, I mean, not my third husband... Oh, Bertsie..."

"Yes, Mrs. Wilson," I said. "But what--ah--price range did you have in mind?"

"Oh, I'm simply an awful dunce about such things, Mr. Carlson--and at such a time." She dabbed her eyes and fluttered her <sup>eyelids,</sup> ~~eyelashes.~~ Then: "Do you think?--perhaps a hundred and fifty dollars?"

There was a watchful silence while I did my figuring. "Hm..." I figured. "Well, yes, I think perhaps we could... We bury them as low as forty dollars for the welfare people." She glanced sharply at me. <sup>But</sup> "perhaps you'd want something more than a plain pine casket? <sup>and still</sup> ~~But~~ without ostentation and show. Shall we say--about two hundred dollars?" I countered.

"Poor, poor Bertsie... He certainly deserves the best... <sup>there is a pause.</sup> "Ah--do you think you could make it a hundred and seventy-five?"

"Sold!" I sometimes say when my ulcer is flaring. But today I <sup>merely</sup> said: "Yes, Mrs. Wilson--a hundred and seventy-five it is--<sup>with</sup> no ostentation and no show. And now about the pall-bearers--"

"Well, that's that—" she broke in. She rummaged <sup>helplessly</sup> in her purse. "Oh, say, Mr. Carlson--could you look over these papers? It's <sup>something or other</sup> about the insurance. I'm so mixed up... It seems--the man said I need a death certificate or something... I'm such a silly fool about any business... It simply baffles me... Bertsie always worried about what would ever become of me if...if--Oh, Bertsie!"

At this point my heart was so wrenched and her grief so uncontrollable that I ~~had her~~ <sup>her</sup> sit down while I <sup>ply her with</sup> brought a glass of water. Then, moved by sheer morbid curiosity, I took the insurance papers. But first I played my <sup>private</sup> little guessing game called "How Much Swag?" In this case I guessed about ten grand. Then I looked at the papers. Hm... There was a deed and three life insurance policies. Quick, I added them up. Whew! I'd done Mrs. Wilson a grave injustice. The <sup>joint</sup> deed, drawn by a lawyer who had acted for her during her last two marriages, left all the real estate to her... No probate proceedings, no husbands relatives to combat <sup>and oppose,</sup> no fuss and feathers, no ostentation and show--and no inheritance tax or probate fees... And the three paid up insurance policies aggregated--I couldn't be exact--something over twenty-five thousand dollars...

I glanced admiringly at the Widow Wilson. She did not see me, and was caught off guard, ~~and~~ entirely composed, with a little half-smile playing around her lips. As this would never do I cleared my throat...

"Hm... Yes, Mrs. Wilson, I think I can help you out. But--ah--can't we wait until after the service, Mrs. Wilson?"

She was clutched with grief again. "Oh, thank you, Mr. Carlson. I just knew you wouldn't fail me... I--I haven't been able to sleep a wink in three nights...just tossing and turning... I've been so worried... Can't we get it out of the way now?--~~I~~mean--I know Bertsie would want it that way... No ostentation and show... Oh, my poor, poor Bertsie..."

"Yes, Mrs. Wilson," I sighed and went downstairs to my desk and wearily whipped out the necessary forms.

<sup>amused,</sup>  
The above ~~ritual~~, embellished somewhat to point up the highlights, is a classical example of the experience every undertaker has with the Professional Widow. The countryside is full of 'em... Sometimes she is a little more subtle, a more accomplished actress, but frequently--as <sup>any</sup> ~~any~~ undertaker will testify--she is considerably more callous than I have just painted her. I usually penalize the dramatic lapses of these latter by refusing to lower my original price and by austerely referring her and her insurance papers to her lawyer... After all, I have already embalmed Bertsie's body, and--unlike a customer in a department ~~store~~ store--the Professional Widow can scarcely walk out without making a purchase...

I remember one Professional Widow who once startled me by casually ordering the Best In The House. I was perplexed for two days <sup>until</sup> ~~before~~ I learned that the doddering old man who accompanied her was not a brother of the deceased--they looked so much alike--but was instead the somewhat premature successful candidate for the Professional Widow's fourth marriage. Then it dawned on me: She was going to show him that she was not moved by any craven spirit; that she was not the grasping, avaricious kind. "Look!" her actions almost shouted at the prospective groom. "Just look at the grand funeral you'll get when you pass over the great divide!"

There are variations on the theme. Several years ago, during a <sup>spirited</sup> discussion over the cost of the funeral with one Professional Widow--among ourselves some undertakers call this ritual with these darlings "The Auction"--the widow confounded me by saying that she ~~had figures to~~ <sup>could</sup> prove that undertakers frequently charged for a funeral as much as six times what the casket ~~was~~ cost them.

"I have the figures," she challenged.

"You don't say?" I answered coldly.

"Yes," she ran on. "I just read an article in the Reader's Digest or somewhere that said that some of you undertakers pay ~~me~~ as low as fifty dollars for a casket and then turn around and sell it for three hundred." She pointed accusingly at a fairly cheap casket she had been stalking and said: "Now, take that one--how much would you want for the funeral if I ~~should~~ take that casket?"

"Two hundred and fifty dollars," I answered.

Still pointing: "But how much did you pay for it?"

"Seventy-five dollars," I answered truthfully, smarting under her indictment.

Triumphantly: "See! Well, then--why can't you sell it to me for seventy-five dollars?" She dabbed her eyes, "I'm just a poor widow you know," she plaintively ~~ask~~ added.

I was stung to the quick. "Madam, I will do just that," I answered watching her face brighten. "You can have this casket for seventy-five dollars--but on two conditions."

"What are they?" she eagerly said.

"That you promptly arrange to take your new casket and your husband's body away from here without my assistance," I answered.

The widow recoiled in horror approximately six feet--<sup>or even</sup> maybe seven. "No, no, no!" she shrilled. "I--I'll pay the two-fifty."

"Fine," I answered softly. "And now about the pall-bearers."

\* \* \*

I hasten to add that these Circes of the Crocodile Tears, the Professional Widow, have their male counterpart in the Professional Widower. However, I do not believe the latter are quite so plentiful, nor, in my experience, quite so beadily grasping as the female of the species. Perhaps I am wrong... Nor have I ever known of a case where a true Professional Widow ever married a true Professional Widower. By some sort of extra-sensory perception they seem to recognize and rigorously avoid each other.

Nor do I mean, in this essay, to indict any person simply because he or she may have married more than once. Heaven forbid. <sup>*If they can stand it I can...*</sup> I have known and dealt with many people who have been married several times who bear no taint of the Professional Widow or Widower. It is difficult to define a member of this professional clan of which I speak, but dead easy to recognize one. It is not precisely the matter of simulated sorrow or avarice or bargain-hunting for a funeral that makes one a Professional. Some thrice-married widows or widowers, who would otherwise qualify on all scores, somehow lack that indefinable something--some curious quality of hunger and avidness, is it?--that would move them from the amateur class into that of the Professional Widow.

How does the Professional Widow keep getting her man?

My staff psychologist should take over her, but since he is out to lunch, I'll venture my own guess. In the first place, her husband is--or rather was--almost invariably a quiet fellow, one who saves both his money and old razorblades; the kind that generally puts the car up on jacks for the winter. He is usually a frugal fellow, not much given to going out with the boys, and is withal, a wistful, solitary and lonely individual. And vastly misunderstood... Then the Professional Widow swims into his ~~king~~ <sup>*KING*</sup> with her combination of Cleopatra, Whistler's Mother and the Frugal Wife--and all is lost...

While I have never quite <sup>felt</sup> ~~been~~ up to making any extensive field investigation of the species, I suspect that sexual allure is not the primary weapon in the arsenal of the Professional Widow. Considering the age and condition of the males she usually stalks she has little need of these blandishments beyond the initial attraction of the rather earthy and elemental bounciness that <sup>usually</sup> characterizes her kind.

It is more in the combined role of the lost mother, the understanding confidant and the friend-who-would-help that she brings down her biggest game... Considering further some of the gaseous, leaking, tottering, wheezy, <sup>garrulous</sup> ~~garrulous~~ masculine wrecks she has ushered to the grave, who am I to question her place in the matrimonial sweepstakes, or to suggest that she does not give full value for every penny she earns?

"Sold,  
" <sup>to</sup> Mrs. Wilson -- and now about the fall-bum..."

THE IRISH SWEEPSTAKES 21

The advent of the automobile speeded up <sup>Americana</sup> ~~our~~ funerals--much to the relief of the pallbearers--but left many a livery stable keeper throughout <sup>the land</sup> America crying in his beer, forlornly contemplating the thousands of dollars he had invested in hungry horses and expensive hacks, ~~both~~ <sup>stables and harnesses, all</sup> of which he maintained largely for hiring out at funerals. My Dad has always claimed that much of the pageantry and, curiously enough, <sup>even</sup> more of the dignity attending the funeral procession disappeared with the passing of the horse...

Swifter funerals did more than that. In the old days funerals took so long that anyone attending the entire service--from church to the graveside and back--usually planned to make a day of it... It was usually so late by the time the mourners finally got back from the cemetery and returned their horses to the livery that there wasn't much use taking off the blue serge suit and going back to work. Certainly not... Unless one was too disaffected by grief, the only sensible thing to do was to go and hang one's foot over the brass rail of the nearest saloon and drink <sup>series of</sup> a toast to the memory of the departed...

But in Chippewa the automobile did <sup>even</sup> more than bankrupt the livery stables and spoil an occasional holiday for the more casual mourners. Overnight it banished what must surely have been one of the strangest and most colorful funeral customs in America. I speak of our local Irish Sweepstakes...

~~Years ago~~ Mike Gleason and Dinny Nolan ran the Hump saloon, a sagging brick building which stood next door to the Chinese laundry on <sup>Chippewa's</sup> Main Street. Both buildings leaned <sup>sadly</sup> against each other <sup>as though</sup> for mutual support... Every Sunday morning following last Mass <sup>at St. Xavier's church</sup> nearly all the Irish males in Chippewa, singly or in pairs, seemed irresistibly drawn as by a magnet to the alley entrance behind the Hump saloon. A ritual knock on the "Sunday" door by the initiated gained immediate



admittance. In a thrice one would be standing in the smoky and darkened interior-- the front blinds had always to be drawn on Sundays--ready to "hist" his "boiler-maker"--a double shot of whiskey and a foaming stein of beer.

"Ah-h-h..."

One glittering April Sunday morning the boys were duly gathered in the Hump as usual... "Say!" big Dan Mahoney sibilantly whispered, so that curious <sup>patrolmen and other</sup> passers-by might not possibly divine that the Hump was again ~~illegally~~ open of a Sunday. "Say," Dan whispered, "I see they're burying poor old Matt Scully--our late brother--tomorrow mornin'. I s'pose the rest of you byes will all be attendin'? I certainly am!"

Since big Dan Mahoney, a red-necked, thick-wristed Irishman, was the president of the local ~~ledge of the~~ Ancient Order of Hibernians and high up in the K.C.'s too, his most casual observations carried the weight of an edict. They'd better all be attendin'...

"Is the race on <sup>fer</sup> tomorrow, I mean?" timidly inquired little Mike O'Dwyer, the treasurer of the Hibernians, and a wistful aspirant for the presidency so long held by big Dan Mahoney.

"That it certainly is," <sup>big</sup> Dan grimly replied. "What?--you're not after tryin' to welsh on <sup>our</sup> the bet are ye, Michael?" he taunted his little rival.

"No-o-o... That I am not," Mike replied. "I--I just wanted to make sure, is all," he lamely added. He glanced nervously at the Lash's Bitters clock on the wall behind the bar. "I guess I'll be gettin' on home--the ol' lady wants me early fer dinner."

"Drinks fer the house!" Dan Mahoney ordered as soon as little Mike O'Dwyer turned and scuttled out the back door. "We'll see who's goin' to win the big bet tomorrow," he happily crowed, winking at the assemblage. His voice sank to a confidential whisper. "As ye awl know ~~too~~ damn well--I'm already after bein' over to Jack Ryan's livery an' rinted Big Red fer the funeral tomorrow!"

The crowd roared, because <sup>as</sup> every child in town knew, ~~the~~ Big Red was the fastest horse in Iron Cliffs County.

"Sh-h-h!" admonished <sup>the</sup> perspiring <sup>proprietor,</sup> Dinny Nolan, toiling behind the bar. "Do you lavericks want me to be hauled up before Judge Flanigan ag'in--an payin' another stiff fine?"

Things looked bad indeed for little Mike O'Dwyer. For it looked like he was going to lose the biggest Irish Sweepstakes ever held in Chippewa. And, <sup>pray tell,</sup> what were the Irish Sweepstakes? ~~pray tell~~

It was simple--at any funeral the last man to show up at the Hump saloon on the way back from the cemetery had to buy a round of drinks for the house. That was why, before any Irish funeral, the prospectiv<sup>e</sup> mourners combed all the livery stables throughout the county to rent the fastest horses they could find--so that they wouldn't lose the Sweepstakes and have to set up the drinks for <sup>all</sup> the rest <sup>of the mourners</sup> ~~the crowd~~ at the Hump bar...

Nothing disrespectful was meant, mind you. It was all in good fun--and since the boys were taking a day off anyway, and had already rented the horses, they might just as well have a little racing bet on the side, so to speak. The departed would surely want it that way, and had probably himself participated in many a past Sweepstakes...

But tomorrow's Sweepstakes was for even bigger stakes! For the track rules provided that when any two or more mourners had lost four Sweepstakes in the past, the last back to town of these four-time losers would set up <sup>and pay for</sup> all the drinks the rest could hold in two hours of <sup>fervently</sup> concentrated drinking... The rest of the mourners didn't count in <sup>these four-time</sup> ~~that~~ races--except to come in and enjoy the <sup>free</sup> drinks. And the big trouble was that poor Mickey O'Dwyer was a four-time loser. Indeed, so was big Dan Mahoney--but hadn't he <sup>deceitfully gone and</sup> already ~~deceitfully~~ rented the fastest nag in the county?...

\* \* \*

Once outside <sup>the livery</sup> in the beautiful April sunshine little Mike O'Dwyer broke into a nervous trot. He scuttled down the damp and littered alley to Division Street, scurred up Division to First, skidded north on First to Pearl, and then turned west on Pearl on a dead run. But where was he going? Home didn't lie that way...

Jack Ryan was just snapping the lock on the sliding door of his livery stable when little Mike ran up to him, all out of breath.

"Thanks be to Gawd I found ye," little Mike panted. "I--I want to rint <sup>your</sup> Big Red <sup>horse</sup> an' a buggy fer Matt Scully's funeral tomorrow--that I do."

Jack Ryan thoughtfully spat a stream of Peerless juice and shook his head. "Sorry, <sup>Mike</sup>," he said. "I'm already jest after rintin' out Big Red fer tomorrow-- to big Dan Mahoney hisself. He was here <sup>early</sup> this mornin' <sup>even</sup> before first Mass."

"Why, the big double-crossin' Hiberian snake!" hissed little Mike. "I'll give you tin dollars extra fer Big Red!"

"Nope, I can't do it," Jack shook his head.

"Twinty, then!"

"Nope! Tain't honorable, t'aint..."

"Twinty-five, then, you robber! Not a damn cint more!"

"Well--" Jack faltered. "Of course, bein' <sup>great</sup> a lover of horses meself, if you're that much attached to the animal, I guess mebbe--"

Just then Big Dan Mahoney and a couple of his cronies appeared on the other side of the street, homeward bound.

"Mind you don't let nothin' happen to Big Red!" big Dan shouted across the street to the wavering livery stable keeper. "If anythin' does," he darkly warned, "in the future our lodge will start rintin' all our horses an rigs from the goddam Swedes!"

"You've nathin' to worry about atall!" Jack reassuringly shouted back.  
"Nathin' atall atall, Dan. Me an' Mickey here was jest fixin' up to rint him Miss Flora, was all."

Since Miss Flora was a gaunt and spavined old pacer that even the local fishermen shunned, little Mike's misery was complete. He stared down at the ground. After big Dan Mahoney's laughter died away down the street, he looked <sup>furtively</sup> up at Jack Ryan. *at any price?*

"I s'pose there ain't a ghost of a chance fer rintin' me Big Red now?" he <sup>enquired</sup> ~~muttered~~ in a small cracked voice. *flannel-mouth Mahoney*

Jack shrugged and threw out his hands. "I'm terrible sorry, Mike," he said. "But what kin I do? <sup>You heard what that big baddy just said.</sup> You don't expeck me to up an' ruin me business, do you? You wouldn't ast a chum to do that, would you? <sup>Or would you?</sup>" *past*

"No, I guess not," Mike dolefully agreed. "But <sup>you know we always give you all me living business.</sup> can't you give me somethin' faster than Miss Flora, man?" *You know we always give you all me business.*

"Nope!" Jack answered. "All the byes was here when I opened up this mornin' an' <sup>then</sup> rinted all the others, <sup>for the Sweepstakes.</sup> That Dan Mahoney's a hard an' jealous man! Looks like he's got 'em all gangin' up on you, Mike. <sup>all</sup> Looks like they's givin' you a royals goosin'."

"That it does," Mike answered, bowing his head in defeat. "That it does--fer a bloody fack it does..."

The next morning--the day of Matt Scully's funeral--little Mike O'Dwyer was down at Ryan's livery stable before Jack himself. <sup>Little Mike he seemed to be reconciled to his imminent defeat and</sup> he looked pretty dapper in his <sup>natty</sup> blue serge suit with the peg-top trousers <sup>and his new yellow button shoes with the bull-dog toes.</sup>

"Good mornin', Mike," Jack cheerily said, when he appeared. "Was you down here so bright and early to shine up Miss Flora fer the big Sweepstakes?"

"May the divil <sup>take an'</sup> blow a <sup>run</sup> gallon of slaked lime up your <sup>in</sup> rear <sup>kilts</sup> valve," little Mike shot back, cut to the quick. "I jest came down early to see if the old nag survived the night!"

"Well, go in an see fer yourself, then," Jack said, rolling back the big doors. "I've got to git busy an' feed all <sup>of</sup> these bloody hungry animals. *They's ruinin' me...*"

Little Mike sat on the stairs to the hay loft and disconsolately watched Jack <sup>pouring</sup> measure out the oats to the whinnying horses: first to Mollie Dee, the little barrel-bellied roan on the far end; then to Chief, the tall gelding in the next stall; then Cub; then Doc; and so on down the line... <sup>straight-gutted</sup> Finally he brought the oats into Miss Flora's stall <sup>-- "git over there, you slattern!" --</sup> and then an extra helping of oats into the big corner box stall occupied by Big Red, his spirited stallion and the pride of the Ryan stables. *"Ah there, Red, me fine big hearty..."* <sup>Jack crooned.</sup> *Little Mike's spirit dropped still lower.*

"Will you stay here <sup>at home</sup> an' watch while I go throw some hay down?" Jack said, starting up the stairs to the ~~left~~ loft. "You kin even start givin' 'em water-- that's if you've a mind to."

"Anythin' to help a pal," little Mike said, leaping nimbly for the water pail. "That's me."

When Jack was safely upstairs pitching hay, little Mike darted into Big Red's box stall.

"Steady there, Red," he crooned, as he whipped a large bottle of castor oil from his coat and dumped the entire contents into the big stallion's oat box. "That's a fine bye," Mike said as he watched the big horse greedily sluicing down the damp mixture.

"Everythin' coming out honky-dory down there?" Jack shouted down through Big Red's hay chute.

"If it ain't--it damn soon will be!" Mike cryptically shouted back.

"What's that!" Jack's muffled voice came down the chute.

"I said 'Yass' you damn laverick!" Mike shouted, quickly darting into Miss Flora's stall.

"Steady there, Flora," he said, <sup>urgently</sup> whipping out another bottle and pouring the contents into her oat box. Lo! this time it wasn't castor oil--it was a full quart of Old Cordwood blended whiskey!

The services for poor Matt Scully began at St. Xavier's Church promptly at 9:00 A. M. ~~All~~ <sup>all</sup> the lodge brothers were there--Dan Mahoney and little Mike O'Dwyer and <sup>all</sup> the others--and more, too, for Matthew Terrence Scully was a well thought of man. Mighty well thought of, indeed. The length of the funeral procession was <sup>always</sup> a tangible measure of ~~the~~ a man's popularity, and <sup>today</sup> the lines of waiting horses and buggies and rigs and hacks stretched up and down Main Street on both sides, as far as the eye could see...

~~Then~~ <sup>the</sup> bell finally tolled, the grey-gloved pallbearers brought out the remains of Matthew Scully and reverently slid them into the tasselled horse-drawn hearse, the mourners climbed into their waiting vehicles, and the cortege slowly headed for the distant cemetery on the north end of town... Big Dan Mahoney, <sup>being president of the deceased's lodge and all,</sup> was naturally up near the head of the procession driving Big Red, ~~being president of the deceased's lodge and all,~~ followed by little Mike O'Dwyer, the treasurer, driving Miss Flora. Both men kept a tight rein on their horses for Big Red and Miss Flora <sup>both</sup> seemed to be curiously skittish and restless--as though they somehow sensed that they were the big stars in this latest and biggest running of the Irish Sweepstakes... So ~~skittish~~ <sup>restless</sup> were they, in fact, that out at the cemetery two small boys were detailed to hold ~~them~~ <sup>their</sup> by the <sup>bridles</sup> while the mourners filed to the graveside and the services began...

"Amen," ~~said~~ Father Daugherty finally said for the last time. Everyone respectfully waited until the good Father and the family mourners were in their hacks and rolling <sup>on</sup> their way--all according to the established rules of the Sweepstakes.., ~~Then~~ the tense crowd <sup>quickly pressed forward</sup> ~~stood back~~ ~~as~~ as Big Dan and little Mike raced for their horses. Long-legged ~~Big~~ Dan reached his horse first and vaulted into the buggy. The crowd "ahed" as it watched Big Dan lash <sup>ed</sup> out with the reins, <sup>and</sup> ~~and~~ as Big Red neighed and reared, <sup>and plunged, catapulting</sup> ~~up and then catapulted~~ away toward <sup>town and</sup> the Hump saloon. Big Dan crouched professionally low over the dashboard, his nose virtually touching Big Red's <sup>tail,</sup> ~~rump,~~ like the driver <sup>s</sup> of <sup>the</sup> racing <sup>sulkies down</sup> sulky at the County Fair. "Giddap!" little Mike calmly said to Miss Flora, gently flicking the reins <sup>shanks.</sup> ~~across her narrow~~ ~~across~~ <sup>"Ah," the crowd breathed. The Sweepstakes was on.</sup>

"They're off!" someone shouted. ~~The race was on...~~

Little Mike O'Dwyer was sitting at a deserted cribbage table in <sup>the cool shadows of the</sup> ~~the~~ Hump saloon, calmly enjoying a quiet boilermaker, when Big Dan burst in through the swinging doors.

"Good morning, Dan," little Mike ~~innocently~~ innocently greeted the loser of the Irish Sweepstakes. "Was you overcome with grief fer the late departed on the way in?"

"Glory be to Gawd!" shouted <sup>the proprietor,</sup> ~~a~~ ~~stunned~~ Mike Gleason, from behind the bar. "What in the name of Jaysus happened to ye, Dan! Was ye jest after fallin' down the manure chute at Ryan's Livery? Speak up! Was ye, man!"

"Drinks fer the house!" big Dan <sup>gamely enough,</sup> ~~gamely~~ roared, groping blindly for the bar. "Here--gimme that there bar rag so's a man can see to pay <sup>fer his bloody drinks!</sup> ~~his bloody way!~~"

## I LOVED THEE, GENTLEMEN...

Quite a few people reveal more about themselves when they are dead than they ever do during their lifetime. While death seals the lips, it also sloughs off all need or chance for pretense and vanity. Secrets which have been buried for years are sometimes reluctantly disinterred when their possessor has needs to be buried. Some of these secrets are starkly tragic, some comic, and some--some remind me of Mary Jane Emery...

Miss Mary Jane Emery was the only child of a pioneer mining family. She taught in the second grade of the Chippewa schools for over forty years. This is a long time to spend in second grade, and may help to explain certain baffling aspects of the following narrative. After teaching school all week, on the seventh day, presumably to keep her hand in, Mary Jane taught a Sunday school class of tiny tots. Then she hurried upstairs to sing in the church choir. There on any Sunday one could see her pallid face, guiltless of makeup, lifted in song and shining with the white light of her vision... Mary Jane was the kind of pure soul who somehow sustains one's dwindling faith in mankind; one of those shining, innocent characters who must surely ascend swiftly to Heaven on spotless wings the moment they breathe their last.

The only dissipation Mary Jane had ever been known to allow herself was an occasional movie. At one time she was quite a fan. But in later years she denied herself even this harmless form of recreation, avowing that the movies had gone to pot. Even the actors weren't what they used to be. For one thing, it seemed they weren't men any more... In fact she became so exercised over the subject that she tried vainly to persuade her pupils, both in school and Sunday school, to shun all movies. "Motion pictures," she called them. She told all who would listen that cheap motion pictures, with their giddy young stars, were ruining the younger generation. She became locally regarded as gently cracked on the subject. Few listened and none heeded...



Mary Jane lived alone in a big brick house on Blaker Street, near the edge of town. She had been born in the old place, which stood ~~wall~~ back from the street among a group of towering elms which had been planted by her grandfather. When her parents died, years before, she continued to dwell there alone, spurning all invitations to sell the place or take in roomers... Then the day came when Mary Jane was retired as a school teacher. The school board presented her with a nice gift and the local newspaper made quite a to-do about the occasion, quoting appropriately sentimental verbal bouquets from some of her former pupils. "May she dwell among us for many happy years to come" was the chief refrain... ~~The~~ members of her church even arranged a testimonial dinner. A delegation headed by the minister brought an engraved invitation to her home and presented it to her. It was to be quite an affair. A male quartet composed of her former pupils was to surprise her by singing an old song embellished with new lyrics, composed especially for the occasion by an undaunted local poetess. "Miss Mary Jane Emery will dwell long in our memory" was one of the deathless lines which I treasure most. It was all very touching--except that Mary Jane neglected to attend her own testimonial dinner...

After nearly an hour of waiting the minister and the excited members of the program committee drove to her home on Blaker Street. Through the porch window they could see Mary Jane playing her piano in the old-fashioned living room. They pressed the bell but there was no response. The minister finally rapped on the window. Mary Jane turned <sup>from</sup> ~~the~~ the piano and approached the window. She nodded gravely at the assemblage and even smiled faintly, and then calmly drew the blinds. Her bewildered visitors kept buzzing the doorbell. There was no response save the soft tinkle of piano music. Finally they turned and went back to Mary Jane's dinner and their cold ham and scalloped potatoes...

In the days that followed her ~~minister and~~ neighbors who had known her for years stood helpless on the porch vainly ringing the bell. Finally they, too, turned and went away. Mary Jane seemed to have retired from the world. She still kept her telephone but never answered it, <sup>only</sup> using it to tell the tradesmen her meagre needs. The only way her friends guessed she was alive was by the thin wisps of smoke that occasionally came out of the tall brick chimney. Deliverymen got no farther than the back door, where they were glad to drop their orders and flee. Naturally the eerie old house soon gained a reputation for being haunted. Months rolled into years. As the years went on most people-- including the male quartet--shrugged and forgot about ~~the~~ Mary Jane Emery. When people spoke of her at all they unconsciously spoke of her in the past tense. For all practical purposes Mary Jane Emery was dead and forgotten during her lifetime...

Then one winter, during a prolonged cold spell, vigilant neighbors observed that no smoke rose from the Emery chimney; the milkman found the frozen contents of his earlier deliveries bazzarely protruding from the neglected bottles. The curiosity of the neighbors turned to concern. But after so many past rebuffs they still hesitated. Finally, on the morning of the third day, some of them made earnest efforts to gain entrance. But all the doors were locked and securely bolted and only hollow echoes answered their frantic knocks on the heavy wooden doors.

On the evening of the third day the nearest neighbor called the chief of police. The chief wisely called the coroner, who in turn--need I add wisely?--called on me. The three of us met and drove immediately to the old <sup>Emery</sup> ~~Jarvis~~ house. Night had fallen, the wind had risen, and it was already considerably below zero. In our car lights the dark and frosted windows of the old house gleamed bluely through the wind-tossed branches of the naked elms. As we waded through the deep snow to the front door, occasional tufts of long-neglected grass rose above the snow like prairie hay.

The burly chief tried the door, which appeared to be bolted from the inside. The mailbox bulged with neglected mail, which the coroner removed and put in his overcoat. The chief stood rattling the knob of the heavy door...  
*We looked at one another.*  
There was nothing to do but break in the door, so with a one-two-three we lunged against the door and catapulted into the front hall. We closed the door behind us and the chief played his flashlight, looking for a light switch. He found one by the hall door, the old button kind. It clicked noisily but no light came on.

We moved into a larger carpeted hall at the foot of a wide winding stair. Our breath steamed and we left tracks in the heavy dust which lay <sup>over</sup> ~~on~~ everything. The chief found another light switch, but this also failed to work. Mary Jane had been without electric lights... The chief cast the beam of his flash into the large living room. Dusty photographs adorned the top of the grand piano and a solitary piece of sheet <sup>music</sup> ~~music~~ stood open on the music rack. For some obscure reason I recall that the selection was called "Hearts and Flowers." I shivered. It seemed much colder inside than out.

By common accord we walked to the stairway and started up, single file. <sup>wavering beam of the</sup> The moving flashlight cast weird shadows on the high walls. At the top of the creaking stairs we came to a long corridor off of which led a number of doors. All of them were closed. The chief stared uneasily at us. We stared back at him and shrugged. After all, he was the strong arm of the law... The chief gulped and then resolutely squared his shoulders and tried the first door. It was locked...

The chief moved down to the next door, the coroner and I following close behind him. He turned the knob and the door creaked open. In ~~the~~ the light of the flash we saw a furnished bedroom. A large canopied double bed was completely made up, spread and all. Lying on the top of the spread, on one side, was a man's old-fashioned long flannel night-gown; and on the other side rested a woman's lacy night-gown. ~~Both were grinning with~~ <sup>Over all lay the accumulated grime of many years.</sup> ~~It was like a visit to a deserted museum.~~ <sup>waiting</sup> We glanced at each other and hurriedly backed from the clammy room. The chief doftly closed the door. "Jesus," he whispered. We had disturbed the bedroom of Mary Jane's long-dead mother and father...

The next room appeared to be a ~~sex~~ sewing room. There was an ancient hand-cranked sewing machine, a collector's item in anybody's antique shop. There was an old dress form, with a dress still on it. There were sheaves of scattered paper dress patterns, piles of dusty dress material and rows of bulging <sup>and begrimed</sup> cardboard boxes. We closed the door... The chief, getting into the spirit of the thing, carelessly flung open the next door. It was a completely furnished child's play-room--undoubtedly Mary Jane's, since she was <sup>stiffly</sup> an only child. There was an orderly array of dolls staring <sup>blankly at each other, sitting around a doll table</sup> at us from a doll table. There was even a rocking horse--I hadn't seen one in years. We silently withdrew... <sup>of</sup> The next room was a store-room; the next appeared to be a guest room--while the last

room was an upstairs sitting-room, complete with fire-place, a big chair and-- of all things--a stereoptican viewer and a set of views resting on a dusty table by the chair. The chief played his flashlight about--but still no sign of Mary Jane. We hurriedly backed out of this last room and closed the door. We clattered down the bitterly cold corridor and huddled about the first locked door at the top of the landing. We glanced at each other. The chief again tried the door. Lo! it was still locked...

Then ~~it~~ was the chief's turn to shrug. He leaned against the door and beckoned us to join him. With another one-two-three, we lunged and burst into the locked chamber. It took the chief a few seconds to recover his balance and focus his flashlight. "Jesus!"--~~This~~ This time from all three of us.

Mary Jane <sup>Emery</sup> ~~Jarvis~~ was sitting up in bed, <sup>she was</sup> blaspheming something in her arms, <sup>which was folded in a prayerbook</sup> ~~It looked like~~ a book. <sup>Mary Jane</sup> She was quite dead, of course, but her eyes were open and she was staring straight ahead of her with an expression that I can only call horribly beatific. We edged closer... An old-fashioned kerosene lamp rested on a table beside her. Playing Sherlock Holmes, I shook it. It was <sup>still</sup> empty, burned out. <sup>How... She had evidently died while the lamp was lit...</sup> The chief shifted his light beam. On one side of the room was a small Franklin Stove upon which stood a tea-kettle. Its contents were frozen solid. There was a frying-pan containing what appeared to be a whitish frozen stew. Mary Jane had ~~evidently~~ prepared her meals in her bed-room. We turned back to the body.

There were <sup>a half dozen</sup> rows of cheap wooden tables on either side of the bed. On these tables, and on a series of rough wooden shelves over the head of the bed, were piled countless hundreds of magazines. <sup>Wherever we looked there were magazines.</sup> There must have been thousands ~~of magazines~~ <sup>of them</sup> in the room, ~~magazines~~ under the bed, resting on every chair and piled so high on her large dresser, opposite the bed, that I couldn't see the tall mirror behind

which was folded in a prayerbook

them. Arrayed on top of this mountain of magazines piled on her dresser was a series of photographs. "Hold the light still," I whispered to the chief. "I--I can't believe it..."

Yes, it was true... They were all ~~photographs of~~ photographs--photographs of old-time movie stars. There must have been a dozen of them, framed under glass, all in elaborate silver frames. I am not precisely a spring chicken, but there were only a few that I could even faintly recognize. I guessed that two of them might have been William Farnum and Maurice Costello, both leading "matinee idols" of their by-gone day. The juveniles of the group, and the only ones I surely recognized, were Milton Sills, Wallace Reid and Francis X. Bushman...

"The magazines, the magazines!" the coroner whispered. "What'n hell are the magazines?" Out of sheer relief in action we pawed over the mounds of begrimed and dusty magazines... ~~You've guessed it--~~ All of them were movie magazines, old and new, thousands of them, with the faces of long-forgotten stars grinning and smirking at us from the dusty covers. <sup>Old Mary Jane's room had become the library of Congress of the movie magazine...</sup> The coroner fumbled in his overcoat and drew out the neglected mail, <sup>he had found on the porch.</sup> Yes, more movie magazines. At the time it seemed entirely natural that he should move to the bed and reverently place them alongside ~~of~~ her body.

"Look!" the coroner whispered, pointing at the body.

<sup>She wore gold earrings and her face was adorned with powder, heavy lipstick and rouge--</sup> Old Mary Jane was made up like a dance-hall girl in an early movie Western. <sup>with globules of illy-applied macara dripping from her eyelashes like black tears.</sup> There was a bright ribbon tied in her sparse gray hair. And that frozen, beatific expression... I looked away--

"What is it?" the chief whispered. It somehow seemed a sin to talk out loud...

"What is what?" the coroner whispered back.

"That--that thing she's hanging on to?"

It took two of us to make her surrender the object from the avid clutch of her frozen, skinny arms. It wasn't a book at all. It was a large photograph ~~of~~ framed in silver. The chief played his flashlight. There was writing on the photograph; small, feminine, teacher-like writing. "To my beloved Mary Jane Emery,"  
We stared at the photograph. "'Bronco Billy' Anderson," the chief <sup>hoarsely</sup> whispered, naming one of the <sup>of American</sup> earliest moviestars. "Jesus," he repeated, this time like a benediction.

"Let's get ~~the hell~~ out of here!" I ~~hoarsely~~ whispered, and all of us turned and ~~silently~~ tiptoed from the ~~room softly closing the door.~~

"the inscription reads."

AN UNDERTAKER'S DREAM

The convention hall was crowded with undertakers. It was the last hour of the last day of our annual meeting; new officers had been elected; the retiring president had smilingly accepted his gift of an initialed travelling bag and had vented an appropriately ponderous witticism about our wanting to <sup>get rid of him by sending</sup> ~~send~~ him away, ~~and get rid of him~~. Weary and somehow resentful with boredom, it was then that I decided to explode my bombshell. I got to my feet. "Mr. Chairman," I said in a falsely amiable tone of voice.

The new chairman delightedly pounded his gavel like a kid with a new toy. "Yes, Mr. Carlson?" he brightly inquired.

"I have a few little remarks I should like to make before we adjourn," I said. "If I am not out of order I'd like to make them now. These remarks may possibly interest some of you," I added with dark significance.

"Please proceed, Mr. Carlson," the chairman beamed. "We are always glad to receive any message of timely interest to our membership. Won't you come up to the platform?"

"Very well, Mr. Chairman," I grimly replied, <sup>striding</sup> ~~walking~~ quickly to the platform. I turned and resolutely faced my audience of fellow embalmers. For a moment my courage deserted me. Maybe they'd lynch me, I thought... But to hell with it. — I just had to get this thing off my chest... "Gentlemen", I finally began, "while I realize that I'll probably be mentally embalmed for uttering such heresy, and henceforth regarded as the Benedict Arnold of our profession, it is my solemn conviction that the prevailing practice of embalming, exhibiting and burying the dead has utterly no excuse in our modern world!" There <sup>I had said it — —</sup> ~~it~~ was finally out...

There was an excited rustle and stir in the audience as I passed. "Wha-- why--what do you mean?" the bewildered chairman sputtered. I had hit him a low blow.



"I mean that the entire physical paraphernalia of the modern burial ceremony is pagan and barbaric--indecent, awkward and expensive--and enormously undignified for all of the participants. To my mind it finds no excuse either theologically, esthetically, practically, hygenically or economically. Its only excuse lies buried in the dry dust of tradition. And all the smooth gilt and soft tremulo which has been added by our modern undertaking practices only casts a further Hollywood gloss of dishonesty and obscenity over the entire procedure--"

"You can't--you must have been drinking, Mr. Carlson," the chairman stammered. "You--you're not well..."

*I leered back at him.*  
"Yass, I've been drinking! *Probably too damn much--or else I wouldn't have* the fortitude to get up here and speak the truth. But don't think this matter hasn't been preying on my mind for years... As for my drinking, as nearly as I can gather that is one of the primary functions of these happy little get-togethers of ours--that and exchanging more sly little trade secrets to further entrench ourselves in our barbaric monopoly."

*shifted chairs*  
*scraped.* The chairman was getting his dander up. The crowd ominously muttered and *scraped.* The chairman pounded his gavel. "All right, Carlson!" he shouted.

"You're shooting off with a lot of big alcoholic talk. C'mon! Tell us what *the hell's* wrong with the way we operate?"

"Just about everything," I coolly replied. "In the first place, it's theologically unsound. Here we mutter around giving pious lip service to the Christian doctrine of the corruptibility of the flesh and the incorruptibility of the spirit--at least we certainly listen to it at every funeral service. Then we turn around and proudly bedizen some wizened corpse into looking like a ham actor, pump him full of fancy chemicals to make him last a hundred years--and then try to sell his widow a fifteen-hundred dollar burial vault to keep the damp off of him while he moulders..."

"Why, er--I--" *the chairman begins.*

"It's economically unsound, too," I rushed on. "There's utterly no rhyme or reason in people spending all the money they are obliged to <sup>layish</sup> on funerals, especially--as is so often the case--when the average death presupposes a stoppage of income and frequently follows upon a long and expensive last illness."

"But isn't that what the insurance is for--"

"It is like hell! That's what some of you men seem to think it's for-- more to your shame... But I speak not of the economic burden to the relatives alone... It's uneconomic to everyone, every way. There is not merely the loss of time consumed in our interminable funerals. Huge tax-exempt tracts of valuable land in our crowded cities and growing towns--land which could probably be better used by the living for playgrounds or parks or slum-clearance projects or to relieve our grievous housing shortages--are crammed and jammed with cracked and sagging tombstones and millions of souring bodies, most of them long forgotten. And I only mention in passing the ghastly contamination of the earth and of our air and water... But that's not all. Take flowers, for instance. Every blessed day untold thousands of dollars worth of ~~beauty~~ beautiful flowers--either the sight or cost of which might help cheer and uplift the benighted here on earth--are dumped on obscure mounds of fresh <sup>dirt and gravel</sup> ~~gravel~~ and left there to wither and die. But perhaps that's somebody else's racket..."

"Wouldn't you even step down off your soap box long enough to honor the dead?" the chairman sneered.

"Of course I would honor the memory of the dead," I shot back. "But may I remind all of you that one does that in the mind and in the heart--usually alone--not in whirling all over hell's half acre in a rented Cadillac, snarling up traffic, or in signing a visitor's register in one of our cosy little slumer chapels,

or in casually phoning your florist to send fifteen--no, make it ten--buck's worth of carnations over to Joe Blow's. No, gentlemen--we have built up a fine, smooth and barbaric ritual that--and I mean this--that, far from celebrating the memory of the deceased, has today really become more of a means to make us forget if not actually to hate the poor bastard... If you would but admit it, the modern funeral we shove out is becoming more and more like a streamlined Hollywood premiere at Gruman's--right down to the snobbish Stork Club canopy and the last blade of phony grass."

"Is that all our fault?" the chairman gamely fought back.

"No, it isn't," I admitted. "But most of you--myself included--have pandered too long to that sort of taste. Mainly, we have failed to take any leadership in guiding the public to saner burial practices. And it's <sup>primarily</sup> up to us and us alone. We cannot expect people numbed by grief to run our show. I swear we could make the mourners wear clown suits and turn somersaults if we gave it the patina of conventionality... But what do we do? For one thing, some of you must be frustrated artists the way you hang over a poor body with your paint pots, like ghouls, trying to make it resemble Valentino or Hedy. It's indecent! And you pout and sulk for days if you are not complimented on your macabre handiwork. Pretty soon you'll be wanting to hold competitive exhibitions... Tommyrot! You know damn well that the primitive practice of displaying a corpse is a pure historical survival, <sup>a</sup> bleeding anachronism, and yet most of you do nothing whatever to change it. Nothing!

"And what do you propose, my fine feathered friend?" the chairman snapped with biting sarcasm. He thought he had me there.

I took a deep breath and plunged... "I propose that we bend our efforts to educating the public to the idea of cremation," I pressed on. "It is the only sane

and civilized way of disposing of our dead. I would ultimately have non-profit public crematories throughout each state, with fixed minimum rates. Memorial services could of course still be held, but all the huge fanfare and clumsy paraphernalia of the modern funeral would be abolished--along with the crushing expense. If people would still foolishly persist in sending flowers I'd turn around and give them to hospitals and churches--or have them sold cut-rate for charity... I would also--"

"Wait a minute!" the chairman broke in. "After you realize this burning vision of yours--no pun intended--just what would you and I do for a living?"

"Wah--what's that you just said?" I faltered. He--why the man wasn't even being fair...

"I said--how would we keep off of charity?" The chairman was smiling grimly, watching me fidget.

"Oh, that," I began. Let's see--where was I? "Oh, yes..." I floundered. "Now just wait a minute! I'm talking about the distant future... We'll all be dead and buried by then. Say! What do you mean? Do you mean to stand there and think for a minute that you can change the inherited folkways and burial practices of a proud people by fiat overnight? What ~~was~~ good enough for Grandpa is good enough for me. It's vicious regimentation, I call it! Who the hell do you think you are?" I paused triumphantly. "Remember, Rome wasn't built in a day, my friend. Don't be a dreamer. Don't be silly..." I turned to the audience. "Thank you, gentlemen, for your attention to my ringing defense of <sup>the practice of</sup> our proud profession."

I shut my eyes and listened blissfully to the thundering waves of applause... Just then in the distance I could hear the insistent ringing of a telephone. Probably the reporters looking for a statement... I groped and fumbled for the night table by my bed. It was funny how it got up there on the platform.

"Hello?" I mumbled, swimming up to surface.

"Look, Erling," It was Ed, my assistant. "Look," he said. "I got good news. Earlier tonight Al Bjornstead's widow picked out a fifteen-hundred dollar vault. I've got him in it now--all fixed up like a miniature Gable. Boy oh boy--does he ever look natural."

"I must have been dreaming," I sleepily mumbled, rubbing my eyes.

"No, it's true. And you ought to see the flowers that've been pouring in. Hell, I'll betcha there's a coupla thousand dollars worth here already--an' two more days to go."

"Nice goin', Ed," I mumbled.

"Goodnight, Erl," Ed said. "Sorry to've awaken you."

"Goodnight, Ed," I said, sitting bolt upright in bed.

Yes, I guess I must have been dreaming, all right. I shouldn't have eaten those damned lobsters...

## THE BURIAL

My father has often told me about a fabulous undertaker called McGee who lived in our town years ago. Mortician McGee conducted his undertaking parlor on the ground floor of an old frame building, <sup>the</sup> upstairs ~~of which~~ was devoted to the pursuit of commercial romance, the establishment being conducted by a lady called Big Annie. <sup>M</sup> Anyway, McGee was obliged to run his place on a shoestring because of his droll tendency to spend all of his money on whiskey. It seems undertakers used to drink in those days... McGee's credit consequently became so poor that he was often hard put to find a hearse or ~~even~~ a team of horses and a driver to <sup>haul the hearse and</sup> dispose of the corpse.

One March day McGee's closest friend and boon drinking companion, Shamus O'Rourke, up and died. For old times <sup>sake</sup> McGee got the corpse <sup>but</sup> O'Rourke's widow stoutly refused to advance a dime until after the funeral. She knew her McGee... What to do? <sup>After much finagling</sup> McGee found he could borrow a hearse but he couldn't find anyone who'd trust him for a team of horses and a driver. Finally, over in Charlie Jokinen's saloon, where McGee had repaired to seek inspiration, he ran into a little Finn farmer called Matti Hunginen.

"Kin you bring in your horses and drive a hearse for me Friday?"

McGee asked <sup>Matti.</sup>  
~~"Will you?"~~ <sup>Little</sup>

Little Matti lived in a farming and logging area north of town known as Hungry Hollow--in the general neighborhood of his closed drinking friends, old harum-scarum Danny McGinnis and big Buller Beaudin and that crowd... Matti happened to be in town with his team of horses delivering milk and eggs for his wife, Impi. The idea of driving at a funeral rather appealed to him...

"Kin you?" McGee repeated. "I'll pay you three bucks--<sup>right</sup> after the funeral."

"Sure, sure," Matti amiably agreed. Friday was one of his regular milk and egg days anyway, and here was a chance to earn some extra drinking money without his wife knowing anything about it.

"OK then," McGee said. "T'is a bargain, <sup>there - that</sup> it is."

McGee the embalmer and little Matti touched glasses. "When you come to town pick up the hearse and the corpse at my place under Big Annie's and then drive over to St. Xavier's Church--prompt at nine o'clock, mind you," McGee directed.

"Matti'll be dere--Yonny on dat dot!" Matti solemnly avowed, tossing down his drink.

The story seems to tell considerably more about the folkways of Chippewa and Matti and his chums than it does about the art of undertaking--but a funeral was involved, so here goes. Take 'er away, Butch...

The day of Shamus O'Rourke's funeral rolled around... Little Matti Hunginen stealthily crept from the side of his snoring wife, Impi, at 3:30 A. M. and worked until daylight currying and rubbing his hay-bloated, dung-coated horses, Fred and Ensio. <sup>Matti wanted everything to go well at his first funeral... He</sup> Matti had scrubbed his face and put on a green necktie and even donned his second-hand Burberry overcoat. Such an unwonted burst of industry and such a display of sartorial elegance filled his dour wife, Impi, with black suspicion.

"Wat you going for do in town, Matti?" Impi asked her husband in her high-pitched voice as he hurriedly put the freshly-polished harnesses on Fred and Ensio and hitched them to his long sleigh.

Impi was a vast be-sweated female, with great breasts which flowed down her person like sagging bladders of wine. She was rumored to possess a bad temper, which was probably not improved by having to minister to the half-dozen odd little blue-eyed Hunginens which overran their farm.

"Wat you going for do in town?" Impi coldly repeated. A purposeful woman, she would not be put off.



"Vy, sell dem milk an' eggs, of course, Impi," Matti innocently answered, drawing back in injured surprise, and buttoning his Burberry overcoat tightly about his throat against the stinging March wind.

Impi stood with her legs apart, her great red hands resting loosely on her broad hips. It was a bad sign. "Wat for you clean horses dat way an' vash your face an' wear dat bes' coat?" Impi was openly skeptical.

"Oh, dat," Matti said, flushing under her steady scrutiny. "I guess I forget for tell you--Matti's going funeral, too, Impi... You see, I got to put my frien' for box. I <sup>to</sup> be carry-man his funeral, *-- what you call, palsy bearer? I got to get <sup>lik</sup> dolled up for dat...*"

"Hm," Impi said. "Who's dat frien' you who's going an' die? Funny you never tell for me. Udder times w'en you come home <sup>from town,</sup> Sippywa, like ol' vindmill <sup>now</sup> you always talk, talk, talk... Who's dis frien' who die so quvick?"

Matti bit his lip. He blinked his eyes, wrestling with a recalcitrant memory. "Vell, how ain't dat funny... I forget his names..." Matti brushed away a fugitive tear. "But he's my bes' frien'!" he loyally added, clucking the horses into a fast trot.

"Better you be home for you supper," Impi shouted after him. "Sarp on da dot, wit all dat milk an' egg money--or I fix you good, ol' soak-man!"

Matti winced under the lash of his wife's voice and clucked the horses to an even faster pace. The sleigh runners sang and squealed along over the frosty March snow. Out of sight of the farm, Matti looked down and lovingly patted the sleeve of his Burberry. Next to his ~~kama~~ team of horses, it was his proudest possession. He had purchased it the year before in Chippewa at a rummage sale conducted by the good ladies of the Methodist church.

\* \* \*

Little Matti Hunginen was one of those luckless, hag-ridden mortals whom the Goddess of Trouble seemed to have selected for her more imposing experiments. Matti was continually in the toils of trouble: trouble with his wife, trouble with the Chippewa police, trouble with his milk and egg customers, and sometimes just in plain trouble with trouble... The hot breath of calamity and misfortune dogged his footsteps and fanned his skinny neck like a beagle on the trail of a tired rabbit. But little Matti had the spirit and heart of a lion. When the going got roughest, little Matti held his head high, stuck out the Adams apple on his wrinkled Tom turkey neck, grinned his Morse code smile--and ordered a double shot of Old Cordwood, *on Chippewa's favorite blended whiskey.*

*omit* When Matti had told Impi he was going to attend a funeral in Chippewa that morning, <sup>*we know*</sup> he had told the truth but not the whole truth. That the deceased was Matti's best friend was a slight overstatement. The departed was a prominent local Irishman whom Matti had never laid eyes on, one Shamus John Patrick O'Rourke, no less. Conversely, that Matti was going to be a "carry man" was a slight understatement. In fact, he was going to drive the hearse at his funeral. He was head "carry man." He had made it up with the Irish undertaker in charge--Big Annie's alcoholic tenant--in Charlie's Place on his last trip to town, three days before. It seemed that the harried embalmer couldn't rent a team of horses from any of the local liveries because of his droll tendency not to pay. But he could borrow a hearse if Matti would only drive it with his team of horses. Would Matti do it? He'd be well paid--as soon as the services were over...

"Dat's O. K.!" Matti had replied, glad to earn a few extra dollars in invest in Old Cordwood, and not have to account for it to Impi as he was obliged to do with every penny of the milk and egg money. "Vat time you like for me to be dere?"

The embalmer and little Matti touched glasses. "When you come to town pick up the hearse and the corpse at my place under Big Annie's, then drive over to St. Xavier's church, prompt at nine o'clock," the embalmer directed.

"Matti'll be dere--Yonny on da dot!" Matti solemnly avowed, tossing down his drink.

On the cold drive into Chippewa for the funeral, Matti kept clucking his horses so that he would arrive in time so that he might imbibe a few drinks at Charlie's Place before the service started. After all, this was his first venture into the solemn business of driving a hearse, and one needed to be fortified for so macabre a task... When Matti arrived in Chippewa at 8:00 AM the horses were steaming from their fast trip. He tied them in the alley in back of Charlie's Place, <sup>-- his favorite bistro.</sup> Charlie was not down yet, but one of his Finnish bartenders was on duty.

"Hello," Matti said. "Gimme big beer an' two double s'ots Old Cordwood!" Matti shivered with mingled cold and anticipation. "S's pretty col' morning did morning," <sup>he amiably observed.</sup>

"But I guessing not for long," Charlie's bartender cynically remarked, setting up Matti's drinks on the bar.

"Ah!" Matti said, <sup>gulping his drinks and</sup> unbuttoning his Burberry. "Gimme vun more double s'ots. Please omit beer, please."

"Say!" Charlie's bartender suddenly remembered. "Danny 'Ginnis an' dem 'razy Hollow boys were in las' night for dat big celebrations today. Dey vant you to mett dem at <sup>Andy Bjurman's saloon</sup> Sippywa House ven you t'rough 'rive dat funerals,"

"Wat celebrations?" Matti asked.

"Vy, St. Patrick's Day! Din't you know it vere St. Patrick's Day? Wat for you wearing green neckties den for?"

"Oh," Matti muttered uncertainly, under his breath, gulping down his drink. "St. Paddy's Day? St. Paddy... Who da hell is dat St. Paddy?"

Matti hurried out and untied his horses and raced over ~~to the Chippewa House.~~ <sup>*the proprietress*</sup> Mrs. Smedburg stood blinking behind the lobby desk. She shook her head.

<sup>*Mr. Ginnis*</sup> "Dannay ~~tole me to tole you he an' da boys would be vaiting for you at Andy Bjurman's saloon over py the depot,~~" she told anxious Matti.

~~"Dank you, please." Matti excitedly left the hotel and raced his team over to Andy Bjurman's saloon,~~ <sup>*near the depot.*</sup> He dearly loved to be with his good friends from Hungry Hollow... But where could he tie his horses?"Oh, dere's good 'lace!" he exclaimed, spying the L.S. & C. local passenger train, which was drawn up at the depot, the rear platform of the last coach extending half-way across the First Street crossing.

Little Matti hasfily tied his perspiring horses, Fred and Ensio, to the rear platform of the passenger train. He'd just leave them there a second, while he ran in to explain to the boys that he had to hurry over <sup>*to drive the hearse*</sup> for the funeral. Yes, he certainly wouldn't want to offend his good pals... "Dere!" little Matti finished tying the horses and happily hurried into the side door of Andy Bjurman's saloon. He peered in the sooty, grimy window of the door. Ah, there they were... He could hear old Danny <sup>*Mc Ginnis*</sup> singing as he opened the door.

"Hello, Matti!" "Well, it's our li'l ol' Matti hisself!" "Do you wanna sell that overcoat!" "Begorra an' hivinly days, if it ain't Matti O'Hunginen wit' the green necktie!" "Have a drink, Matti!" "Have you bin to Iceland wit' a load of snakes, man!"

Yes, these were his loyal jolly friends from Hungry Hollow--Danny, <sup>Big</sup>Buller, and all the boys--who had taken him in and given him refuge and solace so many times when obtuse Impi, his "ol' voman," failed to understand his varying moods... . But there was one thing Matti could not fathom, something which sorely perplexed him. Why were Danny and the boys all wearing green: green neckties or shamrocks or sprigs of trailing groundpine? And who was this mysterious St. Paddy? Matti drew Danny aside and confidentially asked him all about it.

"What!" <sup>old</sup>Danny roared, in the full flush of his two-day siege with Old Cordwood. "You mean you ain't never heard tell of St. Patrick!" Matti hung his head in shame. Danny relented. "Why, Matti," Danny patiently explained. "St. Patrick is the patron saint of Ireland. Every year on March seventeenth--thet's today--Finns an' everybody's an Irishman fer the day--wearin' o' the green an' celebratin' the gran' an' glorious occasion'."

"Wat for?" Matti sheepishly asked.

"What fer?" Danny repeated, pondering. "What fer? Oh! Why, sure, Mike--because he chased all the goddam snakes out of Ireland!" Danny was incredulous. "You don't mean, Matti, that in the ol' country you ain't got no honest-to-god saints! You dassen't tell me that! Ain't they got no patron saint in Finland? Ain't they, Matti?"

The honor of Finland was at stake... Matti opened his throat of his Burreberry, displaying a generous portion of the thyroid cartilage of the larynx. Matti wanted air to make a statement and the better to expose his accidentally appropriate green necktie. Matti threw back his head, his Adam's apple bobbing excitedly. "Oh yes" he modestly admitted, nodding his head. "Finnish peoples dey got dat big-s'ot saint, too."

"What's he called?" Danny inquired. If there were any more miscellaneous patron saints lurking in the offing to be celebrated, <sup>old</sup> Danny certainly didn't want to miss any of them. "What's his name?"

"He's name is called dat St. Heikki," Matti proudly replied. "But he never s'ase snake." Matti shook his head. "No, never, never s'ase snake..." Matti was firm on that point.

"What'n hell did he chase?" Danny demanded.

"Hm... He s'ase bear... Vun day day St. Heikki he see bear, he s'ase bear, he kill bear, he eat bear, he eat hair, he eat ears he eat tail, he eat nass, he eat ever'tings--no salts an' peppers! Dat's to be St. Heikki! He's da bucko!"

"Well I'm a goddam sidehill gouger!" Danny roared. "Drinks fer the house! Make her snappy, Andy! We gotta hurry over an' watch Matti drive fer Shamus O'Rourke's funeral."

"Vere you attendin' da funeral service, Dannay?" Andy Burman respectfully inquired, making conversation, grabbing up a bottle of Old Cordwood.

Danny glared at poor ~~XXXXX~~ unsuspecting Andy. Had Andy forgotten that Shamus O'Rourke and Danny were bitter enemies?--ever since the deceased, a former saloonkeeper, had tossed Danny from his place of business, with the timely aid of two bartenders, some forty-odd years before? Attending his funeral, indeed!

"No I ain't," Danny sharply replied. "When I hates a man, I hates his corpse! But I'm sure goin' over to make certain Matti hauls the remains away." It was a find distinction.

Just then a whistle tooted, a bell rang, and the L.S. & C. local ~~RR~~ coughed and slowly chugged away from the Chippewa depot. Danny glanced at Matti. "My Gawd, Matti, what's the matter! Your face is gone most as green as your bloody necktie!"

Stricken Matti's Adam's apple was bobbing like a trip hammer. He staggered to the side door and pointed tragically out the window and down the tracks. Danny and the boys barely caught a last glimpse of Matti's fleeing horses following in the wake of the train as the strange procession disappeared around the slow curve by the warehouses just east of the Chippewa Fuel Company. Horrified Matti's words were wrenched from him in dry sobs. "Matti...hntie horses for train...train go...horses go...now Matti go!" he moaned. He then abruptly turned and charged out the door and down the tracks, his green necktie and the tails of his Burberry pointing out straight behind him.

Danny quickly sprang into the breach. "Boys, we gotta help pore ol' Matti save his horses! We gotta make sure he buries ol' Flannel Mouth O'Rourke this mornin'!" Danny leapt to the door and held it open, waving the rescue squad on its way. "C'mon boys! Step lively, now! We gotta help li'l ol' Matti!"

Led by eager Buller, the boys piled pell-mell out of Andy's side door and took up the wild chase to help their friend. Danny then quietly shut the door nimbly stepped over to the bar, said a brief "Skoal!" to Andy, and then deftly drained all of the remaining drinks. "Ah!" he said, carefully drying his moustaches and winking at Andy. Then he turned wordlessly and rashed from the place to join the mad cavalcade. He'd personally see to it that old Shamus O'Rourke was buried on schedule...

Danny overtook and passed Buller and the boys just opposite the old gas house. "Good morning, boys!" he amiably shouted as he sped past them, his legs working like twin pistons. Plunging Buller could only wildly roarl the distended whites of his eyes as he lumbered onward, purple from his vast efforts... Danny overhauled Matti just beyond Patridge Creek. "Your coat's unbuttoned, Matti!" he chirped. Danny and Matti ran a dead heat for fifty paces and then Danny sighted the horses and streaked into the lead...

Since they were tied to it, when the L. S. & C. passenger train slowly drew away from the Chippewa depot, Matti's horses reluctantly deemed it expedient to tag along. The result was not fortunate... This is not to intimate that the L.S. & C. local could outrun Matti's horses. There is no occasion to defame Matti's horses like that. But it was the end of winter, and the pocked road bed was icy and uneven, and the environment was somewhat strange, even for Matti's horses...

Just west of the Goose Lake bend, nearly half a mile outside Chippewa, Matti's Fred horse stumbled over a spur switch and suddenly found himself sitting up in Matti's long sleigh, harness and all, leaving his team-mate, Ensio, to carry on alone as best he could. The novelty of the situation suddenly palled on Ensio, a proud animal who was not used to following trains alone. Ensio rebelled, skidding to an abrupt stop... The L.S. & C. tooted and went happily on its way--seeming to gain speed, in fact--none the wiser that it had hauled two "dead heads" for nearly a mile...

As Danny rounded the bend and spied the forlorn team he shouted "Whoa there!" and let out a final burst of speed. "Steady there, Ensio! Steady



boy," Danny soothingly spoke, coming up to the team, patting the perspiring lead horse to comfort him until the others arrived. In a few seconds winded Matti hove into view and tearfully joined Danny. "Oh my poor horses--heh, heh, heh--oh my poor horses--heh, heh, heh--Matti never never going touch nudder drop booze!"

When Buller and the boys arrived, Danny directed purple Buller to assist Fred horse down from the sled.

"Easy there, Fred! Easy, boy," Buller puffed, as he mightily braced himself and eased the squatting horse off of his haunches and down unto his quivering legs. "There!" Buller then staggered over to the sled and fell into it, lying there heaving and blowing and gasping like a winded whale.

Matti threw both his arms around his horses and drew their heads down against his flapping Burberry. "Oh, 'Reddy, Oh Ensio! Never, never 'gain vill Matti tie you up for godtam choo-choo 'rain!"

Matti's desperate embalmer and the numbed and half-frozen pall-bearers were waiting dully at the curbing before St. Xavier's church as Matti slithered the sleigh-hearse around the corner of Magnetic Street into Main Street. Matti was only an hour and forty-five minutes late. After such a harrowing experience, he and the boys just had to stop at Andy's and have a few more double shots of Old Cordwood... Danny and the boys had been simply grand. They had hurriedly gotten the body into the hearse from the deserted chapel below Big Annie's. Buller had to be restrained from doing it all alone... "Whoa!" Matti shouted, driving up before the church. The perspiration rose from the tired horses like smoke from the L. S. & C. local passenger locomotive.

10

"Yep, yep. / They was both steamin' like a baker's arm," was the way Danny explained it later over in Charlie's Place.

"Back the hearse into the curb so's we kin git at the body," the harried embalmer hissed at Matti.

"O.K., O.K.," Matti placidly answered. "Hold you horses." Rising to the occasion, Matti briskly wheeled the horses out on the street, profanely shouting orders at them. "Giddyap, 'Reddy an' Ensio! Whoa, you son-a-bits! Back up, now, li'l bit. Easy! Whoa!" Matti leaned around and brightly inquired, "How's dat, Mister buryman?"

The hearse was backed in at a forty-five degree angle to the curb. "You got'er in crooked--can't you see! Reef 'em out an' try 'er again!" the embalmer icily hissed through his teeth.

Matti was growing nettled. He tried her again, shouting and sawing at his team, but this time he wound up angled out just as bad on the other side. He sat staring straight ahead, stolidly awaiting developments. "Try her again, you Finlander flathead!" hissed the sibilant voice from the rear.

Something snapped inside of Matti. After all, he was a United States citizen and a voter and he paid his taxes. Who was this Irisher who worshipped St. Paddy--the patron saint who merely chased snakes? Who was he to be ordering little Matti Hunginen around this way? Matti leaned over the edge of the hearse and leered back at the ecstatic embalmer and the numbed pallbearers. Matti cleared his throat. *Enough of this buffoonery...*

"Take da son-a-bits out!" Matti gutturally ordered.

POE REVISITED

This happened back in the early 1890's...

Old Axel Martin, a retired carpenter, lived with his housekeeper on Superior Hill. He was a careful man, frugal in his habits, and before he died he left a will disposing of his property in great detail--"my-lace-doily-to-Cousin-Minnie" sort of thing. He even left directions in his will for the undertaker he preferred to handle his funeral--my grandfather; the amount that should be spent on the funeral; the hymns that should be sung and by whom; and even a list of the pall-bearers that should lug him to the grave. His will was an amazing document. One of his requests was that he wanted to be buried immediately and not exposed to the public view. Old Axel Martin wanted to be all set for any contingencies the hereafter might bring...

On Christmas morning he did not appear for breakfast, so Hilda, his housekeeper, brought his morning coffee to his bedroom. She knocked on his bedroom door. Old Axel did not respond to her knock so she knocked again, this time louder. Still no response. "Vere you oop, Mester Martin?" Hilda asked in her Swedish accent. There was no reply. Finally Hilda opened the door. Old Axel was lying in bed, apparently sleeping. "Mester Martin, vere you ready for coffee?" Hilda said, in a louder voice. Old Axel did not ~~stir~~ stir and he looked excessively pale. Hilda, being a practical woman, put down her breakfast tray and approached the bed. She shook old Axel by the shoulder. His body was rigid and unyielding and he did not wake up or stir. She felt his pulse. Nothing. Then his heart. Nothing.

"Poor ol' Mester Martin," Hilda said, drawing the bedsheet up over his face. She brushed the tears from her eyes and then went downstairs and asked a neighbor to call Doctor Pederson. Doctor Pederson, an old practitioner in

our town, had been the Martin family doctor for many years. However, since he had not attended old Axel for several months, he brought the coroner along, as required by law. Both of them carefully examined old Axel. There was no pulse, no heartbeat, no respiration, the pupils were dilated and fixed, there were no reflexes and the body was cold and rigid. Dr. Pederson stared sadly down at his old friend and shook his head. "Heart attack," he said, and the coroner pursed his lips and nodded his head and entered this diagnosis in the death certificate.

My grandfather brought the body to the backroom of his furniture store. In the old days when an undertaker prepared a body for burial he did little more than bathe it, wrestle it into the burial clothes, lift it into the chosen casket, and then deftly apply a little makeup so that he could stand back and listen raptly to the neighbors saying "Don't he look nat'ral?" Embalming was of course not unknown, but was not required by law as it is today. One ordinarily did not embalm a body unless there was danger of mortification before the hour of burial. And in Axel's case, here it was a cold Christmas day, Axel would be buried from the traditionally cold Swedish Church the next morning--and Christmas dinner was home waiting for Grandpa... Anyway, Grandpa did not embalm old Axel Martin...

By far the biggest problem facing grandpa was the question of pallbearers for ~~old~~ Axel, not preserving his body. For old Axel had left careful directions that six of his nephews should act as pallbearers. This was all very well, and a touching bit of sentiment, except that one of the nephews, Joachim Martin, was one of the town's half-wits. What to do? Grandpa shook his head and consulted with the other nephews. They were as dismayed as Grandpa over the situation. "My, my," they said, but whether out of superstition or fear that they might somehow be breaking the will--under which they were named as beneficiaries--they did not authorize Grandpa to substitute a full-witted pallbearer for Joachim.

Grandpa shrugged and sought out the half-witted nephew, Joachim. He found him at his usual hang-out, Ryan's Livery Stable, busily polishing harnesses.

"Joachim," Grandpa said. "Your Uncle Axel died during the night and--"

"Nope!" I don't believe it," Joachim said, in his extravagant Mortimer Snerd voice.

"--and he wanted you to be one of the pallbearers at his funeral," Grandpa concluded, wincing a little at the prospect facing him.

"Awright, awright--I'll do it fer Uncle Axel--but I still don't t'ink he's dead," Joachim gobbled.

"Neither do I," Grandpa placatingly said, "but let's keep it a little secret just between us." He winked at Joachim and Joachim winked back. Grandpa then carefully directed Joachim to wash his ears, curry his hair and change into his blue serge suit. He told him exactly when and where to appear. He then gave him a shiny new quarter.

"Aw, gee t'anks," Joachim said, biting the quarter and sinking it away in his overalls. "I'll be dere--but I still don't t'ink he's dead. He--he ain't ready..."

"I know, I know," Grandpa said, "but let's not spoil all the fun for the others. We'll fool 'em... And I'll give you another quarter after the funeral if you don't tell anyone." Grandpa was going to bribe Joachim into a state of grace.

"Awright. Mum's da word, Mister Carlson--but I never heard tell of burying a live man before. Sounds sorta crazy to me..."

Poor Grandpa spent a sleepless night conjuring up fantastic scenes of what Joachim might do or say at the funeral the next morning. But all his fears

were groundless... Joachim showed up the next morning wreathed in smiles, all scrubbed and curried and beserged--with shiny new yellow button shoes with bull-dog toes to distinguish him from ~~his~~ <sup>the</sup> more sombre pallbearers. Grandpa winked at Joachim and Joachim winked back at Grandpa, grinning his slow knowing smile. Everything went swimmingly after that. It was really amazing... Of course there was that one rather bad moment when the relatives viewed the body for the last time. Joachim bobbed a little when he had muttered, "Why don't someone wake him up--why don't you? Can't you see he's jest sleepin'?" But no one else heard him and the relatives quickly shushed him up and Joachim was just grand after that--right through to the last Amen.

After the funeral, when Grandpa presented Joachim with his reward for good behavior--his second quarter--Joachim beamed and shuffled his feet and said: "Gee t'anks, Mister Carlson. I had an awful hard time keepin' my mout' shut when ol' Uncle Axel was knockin' on the coffin out dere when we was lettin' him down. Yup, yup... Did you hear 'im knockin', Mister Carlson, did you? I could hear 'im plain..."

"Sure, sure, Joachim," Grandpa soothingly responded, patting his shoulder. "Uncle Axel was just saying goodbye, that was all."

Before his death Grandpa told Father this story many times to illustrate some of the vicissitudes of undertaking in the early days. Fortunately Grandpa was not around to learn the macabre sequel to his story... Years passed. Grandpa died. Joachim Martin began to "hear voices" especially his Uncle Axel's, and he finally had to be taken to an institution, where he soon died. He was buried next to his Uncle Axel...

The town gradually expanded around the crowded little cemetery and finally the village fathers voted to move the entire cemetery to a big plot of ground on the north end of town. Weeks were spent in digging up and transferring former burials to the new cemetery. At length the grave-diggers came to the Axel Martin lot. Graves were shallower in those days and they soon came to the casket of Axel Carlson. It was carefully raised, the dirt and gravel removed, and the corroded lid unclamped to make such identification as might be possible. My father was present for this purpose...

The lid was opened. My father and the others looked, gasped, and staggered back. A contorted skeleton lay twisted on its side, the rotted clothing torn away from its neck to its pelvis, the body hands clenched and raised to its throat--all of the clawed fingers of one hand thrust and reaching down into the gaping, yawning jaws... Old Axel Martin had been buried alive... Only an unheeded, mumbling half-wit had sensed it...

Strictly speaking, death is a relative term, and we can trace with certainty only the cessation of organic life. We know that the matter of which the body is composed does not perish after "death"; instead it undergoes changes which we call decay or putrefaction, but which in the long plan of Nature is merely a gradual change in form and a preparation for its becoming subservient to new forms of life, whether plant or animal...

One of the sublime and awful mysteries of death is the question of what becomes of the mind and the memory and of that elusive life spark we call "personality". For it is the presence of these intangibles that constitute any tolerable concept of what is meant by life--not in being a mere oscillating mass of ~~pulsing~~ protoplasm... The problem has driven shoals of brooding parsons and philosophers half nuts--and yet we must bravely admit that Science sheds not the tiniest point of light on the subject...

In death the reflexes disappear, followed by a complete muscular relaxation, in turn followed by great stiffness (rigor mortis), usually in from 16 to 36 hours. The bodily temperature tends to assume that of its surroundings, the blood coagulates and then later becomes more fluid, finally discharging from the orifices if unattended. There are also important changes in the eye. This is what we commonly assume to be a state of death. But there are living states that in some respect follow these symptoms, and it is situations like this that can--or rather, once could--give rise to such ghastly stories as that of Axel Martin...

A clock does not cease to be a clock when it runs down. It does cease to perform its primary function--telling time--and in that sense a dead body is like a run-down clock. Technically, death proceeds from the heart and the brain. As I have said, the classic signs of death are cessation of circulation and breathing, disappearance of the reflexes and muscular reaction, and certain changes in the eye. Yet there have been cases known where people who were in a state of trance or shock or asphyxia from drowning, and who possessed many or even all of these symptoms, who were nevertheless later revived. Were these people "dead" in the meantime?

The two major situations where this apparent death in life occurs are known as catalepsy and trance. In the former there is frequently a loss of consciousness, the muscles become rigid (but not the limbs), the temperature is lowered, and respiration and pulse become retarded. Yet no modern physician and few undertakers would mistake this state for death. However, in trance (sometimes call death trance), the appearance of death is much more striking: consciousness is often abolished, the entire body becomes pale and cold, the flesh tends to lose its elasticity, the muscles and limbs become rigid, as in rigor mortis, the reflexes may be blunted or entirely lost and the pupils of the eye become dilated and immobile. Respiration and pulse can sometimes be detected only by the use of the most sensitive instruments.



There are only two cases that have come to my attention during my time in which a person was believed to be dead when he was not. In neither case was I an eye-witness. One concerned an elderly woman from our town, a Mrs. Bickell, who came in to our place one day and made the not unusual request that she wanted me to bury her when she eventually died.

"But be real sure I'm actually dead," Mrs. Bickell added. "I don't want to go through that awful Chicago experience again."

"What was that," I asked, mildly startled.

"Why, fifteen years ago I went to a hospital in Chicago for a gall-bladder operation," Mrs. Bickell amiably rattled on, while I winced and bowed my head, waiting for her to whip out a jar containing the evidence. "I had a hard time during the operation...nearly died, in fact--and that same night the nurses thought I really had died. I heard them say, 'She's dead,' but I couldn't move or speak. Then I heard them call the orderly and I was aware when he wheeled me down the corridor, into an elevator and down to the hospital morgue. I even heard the doctor come in to the morgue, hours later, to examine me. I felt him put the stethoscope over my heart and I wanted to shriek that I was alive, but it <sup>as</sup>was/though I was clutched in a hideous nightmare--I couldn't move or make a sound. It was sure a good thing for me that young doctor wasn't in a hurry to go out on a date! After nearly a minute, as he told me later, he detected a faint heartbeat. I was rushed from the morgue, heart-stimulants were given me--and in three weeks I left the hospital feeling better than ever."

This is the story Mrs. Bickell told me. I cannot vouch for its accuracy. On the other hand I can see no reason why she should have lied to me about it. At any rate, I hastily promised her I would make sure she was dead if I survived

her and was her undertaker. "You will be," she shot back. It happened, however, that I was in the Navy when she died, and I did not learn of her passing until she was dead and buried--some twenty-three years after her first "death" in Chicago. I devoutly hope the old girl was really dead the last time...

The other experience concerned a fellow-undertaker in a neighboring town. He was called at midnight to the local hospital to pick up the body of a man who had just died of pleuro-pneumonia. The nurses and relatives had been present at the bedside at death, but no doctor had examined the body.

My fellow-undertaker took the body away and decided to embalm that night. He and his assistant placed the body on the slab in his morgue, while the preparations were made. The assistant happened to be standing near the body.

"My Gawd!" he suddenly cried. "He--he's breathing!"

It was true. The man was still living--his lungs so filled with fluid that his breathing was almost imperceptible--but he was nevertheless still alive... The doomed man was rushed back to the hospital where for two days the slender threat of life held on before it snapped. This time he was pronounced dead by the head doctor--and needless to say no more persons are turned over to the undertakers from that hospital unless they are pronounced dead by the attending physician...

This last case was of course not one of trance, and only goes to show that the rare instances of mistaken death are not confined solely to trance states.

But getting back to our first case--that of old Axel Martin...

It is evident that Axel Martin was buried alive in an advanced state of trance. Not too much is known about the causes of why people go into such states aside from the general knowledge that it usually results from severe physical or psychical shock... Some people worry over this possibility so much that they have been known to leave directions that their bodies be held unembalmed until unmistakable signs of putrefaction sets in, the only conclusive test of death. The late John Barrymore was said to be one of these brooders...

One thing is certain: no person can survive modern embalming. If he isn't really dead when the embalmer starts to work on him, he surely will be a dead cookie when the job is done. This raises possibilities almost as harrowing to contemplate as the story of Axel Martin. How many people have been unintentionally murdered in the embalmer's morgue? And supposing--I hate to even think of it--just supposing that our would-be corpse is in a helpless state of trance and is conscious of what is going on? Like poor Mrs. Bickell in the hospital morgue at Chicago. But what am I saying? How did I ever get on this macabre subject? I must be in a trance myself. For Lord's sake let's talk about something else...

## I KNEW HIM GOOD

Believe it or not, there are more types of mourners than there are ball point pens--all the way from the mute and stricken kind who go through the funeral service clutched and numbed with their sorrow to the variety that apparently show up at funerals merely to see who's there, what's cookin'--and perhaps to display their latest new look. In between there are as many kinds of mourners as there are people. In this exercise I propose to trot out some of the more memorable mourners our family have watched perform at the side of someone's bier...

Old George Voyer, a fiery and controversial local character and one of Chippewa's oldest and most respected saloonkeepers, was lying in state in Grandpa's funeral parlors. One of the departed's rheumatic former bartenders, Charlie LaBeau, limped in one evening and stood, hat in hand, staring down at the remains. The relatives and other mourners were touched to observe that old Charlie's shoulders shook violently as he surveyed his former employer. They were touched even more smartly when Charlie turned from the casket, his face wreathed in smiles, and delivered this deathless and highly audible utterance to Grandpa: "The old son-of-a-bitch really is dead, isn't he?"

Mrs. Lucy Parrott fared slightly better when her number came up. During the course of her long and busy lifetime Lucy was reputed to have recklessly slandered every person who had ever crossed her path--besides quite a few who had vainly hoped to be spared the lash of her tongue by making wide detours. In short, Lucy was a woman of few words--but she used them constantly. Then one day Death stilled Lucy's wagging tongue forever. One of her sorely tried neighbors, a Mrs. Tillson, visited our funeral home to confirm the phenomenon. Quite a few local aspirants to Lucy's fallen mantle were clucking busily on the sidelines. Little Mrs. Tillson, the neighbor, stared intently down at Lucy for nearly five minutes.

The clucking on the sidelines ceased, replaced by avid curiosity. Then Mrs. Tillson cupped her ~~Y~~ ear and bent down over the casket. I stood by nervously witnessing this pantomime, realizing that something was cooking but not knowing precisely what it was. I cleared my throat.

Still cupping her ear, little Mrs. Tillson shot me a quick, solemn, birdlike glance. Then she turned back to Lucy and whispered, the kind of a whisper that can pierce walls of stone: "Thank you, Lucy, dear," she whispered. "That's the sweetest thing I ever heard from your lips." With that little Mrs. Tillson turned with the sweetest smile, threw back her head and swept from the place amidst the profoundest hush that I--an expert on hushes--have ever observed...

When widowed Mrs. Kellstrom died she left six stalwart sons. One of them was in jail, one was currently in an alcoholic ward, while a third was a patient in an insane asylum. The other three were still at large, but making prodigious strides in their efforts to join their absent brothers. Only one of the three available sons, Swan, showed up for the funeral, and he was so intoxicated that I had to occasionally pluck at him to keep him from pitching head foremost into his mother's grave. During the last rites he kept masticating an enormous charge of tobacco, punctuating each pause of the preacher with an emphatic stream of tobacco ~~juice~~ juice. "Wheet!" he would go.

"Amen," breathed the harried preacher, finally, rolling his eyes over at me. "Amen," I whispered to myself, rolling my eyes up to Heaven.

"Wheet!" went Swan, this time whimsically adding a rumbling burp to demonstrate his versimilitude. Then he wheeled around and lurched toward the preacher, producing an enormous roll of bills from his trouser pocket.

"How much do I owe ~~you~~ ya?" he demanded in a voice audible to mourners in an adjoining township.

"Sh!" the preacher placatingly whispered. "You can take care of that after. If you'll--"

"They ain't no after," Swan broke in. "I'm highballin' outa this lousy town tonight--an' I don't want no bloody preachers an' the like sayin' Swan Kellstrom didn't pay his bills. How much is it!"

"Five dollars," the cowed preacher whispered.

"Hell, you can't make no money that way. Make her ten," Swan said, wetting his thumb and grandly peeling off a bill and tossing it toward the unhappy cleric. "No wonder you preacher fellas all look so seedy."

"How much you chargin' for your racket, Carlson?" he belligerently demanded.

"Four hundred and seventy-two dollars," I shot back. "That includes the tax."

"Here's fi'e hunnert--use the change to buy flowers fer Ma."

He stuffed his wad of bills in his pocket and turned to the grave. For a moment he wavered uncertainly. Then he briefly saluted his temple with one finger. "Goodbye, Ma," he said in a low voice. "See you some day beside them still waters you use to tell us about when we was kids." Then he turned and strode away, his eyes brimming with tears. "Wheet!" he doggedly went, in a final and triumphant farewell.

For some unaccountable reason I left the cemetery that day with a lump in my throat, a lump as large--well, surely as large as Swan Kellstrom's roll of bills.

I do not for a moment wish to imply that a majority of our mourners are eccentrics or clowns or exhibitionists--or that they merely come to a funeral to gloat. Far from it. Most mourners are like most people: sincerely

respectful, conventional, even humdrum, and usually at great pains to do ~~the~~ and say the proper thing. A mumbled and embarrassed "Sorry for your trouble," is the stock phrase with which the majority of our local mourners greet the members of the family of the departed. I could write quite an essay on the groping inarticulateness of the average American when faced with a deep emotional crisis. "Sorry for your trouble," a quick handshake, and then an interlude of staring down at the pinched and wizened features of the deceased, while the visitor assures the member of the family or me what a grand makeup job I have done. Sometimes I could scream...

Often, as they stand over the casket, the bereaved will conduct the visiting mourner on a quick Cook's tour of the last illness of the departed: complete with fever charts, blood counts, cardiac graphs and systolic diagrams. "And then she was gone," these tours frequently wind up. I often wonder why the visitor doesn't halt the bereaved and remind him that he merely came to pay his respects--not to conduct an inquest. I am constantly amazed at the hardihood of people--people who are genuinely stricken over the loss of a loved one--standing over the casket and recounting in harrowing detail the last agonies of the departed... We are a hardy people...

I also believe there is a strong current of superstition and mysticism lurking in the hearts of most average Americans. I refer here to the constant practice of bereaved persons discovering and recounting, after the fact, that the deceased before his death, gave some subtle sign or possessed some secret premonition of his impending death. Especially is this true where the death is at all sudden. I have listened for hours on end to relatives spinning these endless accendotes, endeavoring to invest with the darkest significance events which, had the deceased lived, would have passed utterly unnoticed.

I'll give you one more mourner--there are scores I could tell about--and call it quits. I'll give you Annie Bjornson...

Annie is a tall angular, middle aged spinster who keeps house for her three brothers who are carpenters. Annie's greatest pleasure is to attend funerals. She is Chippewa's professional mourner. She attends all of the funerals conducted from our establishment--and I once knew of her to hire a cab, as frugal as she is, to fly from our place to a rival's so that she could squeeze in a double-header for the day. It makes no difference if she ever saw the deceased before. Annie is Chippewa's professional ghoul and proud of it. This is her unvarying procedure:

She will stalk into the funeral home looking neither to left nor right, march into the chapel, stare down at the corpse, and then turn and shake hands with me or the nearest prospect and say: "I knew him good." She may never before have laid eyes on the poor man. Then she strides over to the Visitor's Register, signs her name, and stalks from the place! She will usually be back for the funeral.

On her pre-funeral reconnaissance tours only twice have I ever heard her saying anything more or other than: "I knew him (or her) good."

Once was when I got home from the Navy after four years absence. The first time I saw her upon my return she wheeled in past me, stared at the corpse, assured the nearest bystander that she "knew him good," signed the register, and started to stalk out the door.

"Annie," I said, rising from my desk and coming forward. "Aren't you going to say hello to me? I've been away in the Navy for four years."



Annie stood in the door and gave me a withering look. "Hump," she snorted. "Back, 'ay."

The other time was when we embalmed a Japanese ~~tumbler~~ tumbler who had died while in town with a circus. For two days I lay for Annie, going without meals, and when she finally sailed in I leaped to join her at the casket. Annie stared down at the deceased Japanese. She blinked and shook her head and stared some more--the complete double take. She turned to me and abruptly held out her bony hand. Her eyelids fluttered ever so slightly. "I knew him pretty good," she gamely said, dropped my hand, signed the register, and stomped from the place.

Mar 5, 48  
Incomplete

THE MISER

"AS some lone miser, visiting his store,  
Bends at his treasure, counts, recounts it o'er."  
Goldsmith

A miser is a person to whom money has ceased to be a means to an end but has become the end of living itself. He is one who starves the mind and body and spirit in the midst of plenty. Perhaps the most pathetic individuals who ever require the services of an undertaker are dead misers. Certainly during their lifetime misers are among the most warped and stricken creatures inhabiting God's globe.

People instinctively shun a known miser so that his life is perforce lonely and barren of human companionship. This is the way he apparently wants it. Certainly the little gluttonies of life are not for him: the occasional mild drunk, the week-end with an amiable blonde, that expensive new Debussy album by Maggie Teyte that one shouldn't have bought. He denies himself everything that makes life bearable to a person of normal tastes and appetites...

One wonders what fractures of personality or scars of heredity or childhood make up a miser. Our psychologist would probably adjust his pincenez and pontificate about the basic sense of insecurity that spurs him on. The final irony is that this fanatic drive for security--if that is what ~~ix~~ it is--usually finishes him off. Malnutrition is the occupational disease of the well-heeled miser... I believe miserliness to be a form of mental illness where the normal instinct of self-preservation runs amuck and becomes debauched into a suicidal urge for the final security of death. There ought to be a law...

By miser I do not mean the revolting niggard that walks a mile to read somebody else's Chicago Tribune. He is merely "tight"--and deserves nothing

more than a kick in the coccyx for walking even ten paces to read the Trib. These "tight" individuals are fundamentally just plain selfish, in a mean, greedy, snuffling sort of way, and are just as liable to go on a fine, ~~free-~~spending, beard-growing drunk the following week.

Your true miser doesn't even want to read a newspaper--free or not. He prefers to live in a bleak, covetous little world of his own, completely insulated from depressions, wars or other disasters except insofar as these events may interfere with the acquisition and worship of his God, Money! He distrusts his fellow men and all his institutions. Banks will never do. Perhaps some modern misers are started by bank failures... Your miser must invariably have his <sup>booty</sup> ~~money~~ near him, so that he can run it through his fingers or walk barefoot on it or whatever it is misers do when they are alone. His devotion to it is not primarily selfish--that is, to ultimately satisfy some understandable personal appetite--but is in a sense peculiarly selfless. He will mortify the flesh, even unto death, in his worship of the object of his adoration... Then one day <sup>he dies</sup> his jaw drops, ~~and he dies and~~ the undertaker carts him away <sup>and</sup> scrubs him up and buries him, leaving the relatives and tax collectors to scramble over the <sup>treasure</sup> ~~remains~~. For it is surprising how many people, especially remote relatives, pop up to revere his memory--after the swag is found.

I have buried a number of misers and each experience so shakes me that I somehow yearn to deck myself out in laurel wreathes and reel from tavern to tavern, shouting and leaping, glutting the jukeboxes with nickels, trying desperately to push aside this latest peek at the essential loneliness of Man. Instead, being a respectable small-town undertaker, I usually round up the boys and retire to a back room, numbing myself with straight poker and blended whiskey far into the night...

1: The Sucker King.

Old Rolf Ohming had a moustache so long you could tie it in a bow under his chin. I know, because I tried it... People called him "The Sucker King" because almost any time of the day or night, during the spring run on the Sucker River, one could see him fishing for suckers<sup>in</sup>/that turgid river, his drooping moustaches wafting gently in the spring breezes. Old Rolf's tarpaper shack stood on a bald, lonely hill above the river and commanded a splendid ~~and totally unobstructed~~ view of the confluence of the Chippewa sewage canal with the Sucker River.

This river, oddly enough, received its name because it was inhabited by suckers. This made it something of a geographical freak in a region which frequently insisted upon calling a thoroughfare Pine Street although it might be totally devoid of a single pine, and another Maple Street despite the fact that it daily showered its pedestrians with pine needles...

Old Rolf was poor. He was so poor that people pitied him when they saw him sitting on the banks of the Sucker~~River~~, just below the sewage canal, patiently fishing for the greedy suckers. He was so poor he even used a bur-lap potatoe sack for a creel. He dug the worms in his garden and cut a sapling for a pole. Total investment: One fish line and <sup>whatever</sup> ~~the~~ hooks he used... After many hours, when the sack was full, he would arise stiffly and shoulder his slithery load, and plod up the hill to his shack--where he proceeded to clean and preserve his catch of suckers in <sup>tall</sup> tin containers of salt brine. For it was known that old Ohming ate these loathsome-looking fish, which was high enough cause for pity considering the poverty it disclosed, not to <sup>think of</sup> ~~mention~~ the place where he caught them...

When he first came to Chippewa from Denmark old Ohming had been married. For a number of years he worked in the carpenter and repair shop of one of the

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mines and lived in a little rented company-owned house on a treeless street appropriately called Elm... He was an expert shappener of saws--filer, I think, is the technical name. The Ohmings were childless and when his wife died during the flu epidemic of World War I old Rolf quit his job in town, packed his saw-sharpening tools, and built his tarpaper shack on the outskirts of town overlooking the Sucker River. There~~by~~ he lived until the day of his death, hauling wood, catching and preserving suckers, sharpening saws and cultivating his potatoe patch and his long flowing moustaches.

Like the pilgrimages to Emerson's builder of better moustraps, people still beat a path to old Rolf's door to get their saws sharpened. For one thing, while he charged more than most saw sharpeners, he did a better job than any. And loggers and others that sought his services could nearly always find him in. He ~~never~~ rarely left his shack except to forage for firewood or ~~on his infrequent trips~~ <sup>go to</sup> to town for supplies. When he left his shack, even to fish in the Sucker River just below his place, he always drew the blinds and elaborately locked the door with two padlocks. A queer and secretive man was old Rolf Ohming of the flowing moustaches...

Another of his drolleries was never to invite anyone into his shack. A logger might appear at his door in the midst of a crackling thunder storm, and be obliged to wait outside in the deluge while old Rolf rattled his series of chains and bolts, cautiously opened the door a few inches, thrust out a grimy arm to take or deliver the saw in question--and then shut the door in his visitor's face. But still they came back, because no one could sharpen saws as well as old Rolf Ohming.

Unwitting couples who occasionally wandered afield to do their wrestling on the hill near his shack were known to have claimed later that they heard wild strains of violin music coming from his darkened shack late at night.

Always these lovers avoided repeat performances. Somehow this eerie music was a greater deterrent to casual trespassers than a slavering dog. The midnight wrestlers quickly found other hills upon which to conduct their *love* matches.

Then one autumn evening just before the War, Makinen, the Finn logger, brought a circular saw to be sharpened. Repeated knocks on old Rolf's door brought no answer, so Makinen went away. Before he left he observed through a crack in a tightly drawn curtain that a light was burning. And the outside padlocks were dangling unlocked. Old Ohming must be inside... The next morning Makinen came back and still no answer. The outside locks were still the same way, unlocked. Since this was the longest time old Ohming had ever been known to stay away from his shack, Makinen reported the incident to the chief of police.

"Someth'ing's damn funny up dat ol' man Ohming's s'ack," Makinen concluded.

We found old Ohming dead in his shack, sitting up in bed, hugging an old family bible. I had never suspected such piety on his <sup>part</sup>... "Heart attack," the coroner sagely observed, as he drew a blanket over the body. There was a kerosene lantern suspended from a rafter above the body, still lighted. We looked around...

The shack was a fantastic <sup>litter</sup> ~~little~~ of filth and dirt and odds and ends: balls of string and cord suspended from the rafters, endless piles of old newspapers, a little work bench littered with files and saws and other marks of his trade. And that fearful stench! What caused that? Ah, yes... a dozen-odd old carbide cans sitting around the room, loaded and ~~festering~~ <sup>festering with</sup> with salt brine ~~ix~~ and the bloated bodies of deceased suckers.

"Open that damn door!" I called to the prowling coroner, being driven at the same time to light a funeral cigar I had absently accepted from a mourner the day before.

In one corner we saw a homemade music stand from the side of which hung ~~suspended~~ a fiddle and a bow. A table near the music rack was covered with piles of sheets of ruled brown wrapping paper. I looked closer. Even with my dim musical education, I perceived that the sheets were musical compositions for violin--solos, concerti, string quartets, trios, duets--all composed, dated and signed by Rolf Ohming. I recall one composition, entitled in Danish, which <sup>D</sup>would freely translate--for the charitable--into "The Ghosts of Horseus." I discovered later that Horseus was a town in central Denmark. This was the strange music that stray lovers on the hillside heard at night...

"Look here!" the chief spoke, rummaging in a tall, old-fashioned writing desk. He drew out a canvas-bound bookkeeping ledger. In it, in old Rudolph's careful handwriting, appeared to be noted every penny old Rudolph had spent since he had moved to his shack years before... Most of the purchases were for salt and flour and kerosene and more salt, a few for sugar and coffee, a very few for clothing, and a small amount for annual taxes on his plot of ground. Nothing more. What did he live on? The answer was obvious: potatoes and suckers... Here was a man that made a spendthrift out of Thoreau and moved his stay at Walden Pond into the <sup>realm</sup> ~~real~~ of a prolonged bacchanalian orgy...

"What'n hell are these?" the coroner said, drawing a sheaf of brown wrapping paper from a wooden shelf. What were they indeed! Perhaps Einstein could have given us the answer... The sheets were covered with involved mathematical equations, some so long that old Rolf had had to ~~put~~ <sup>pin</sup> ~~paste~~ two or more sheets together to accommodate his figures. We stared at one another. Old Rolf Ohming--the composer and mathematician... Was he a madman or a genius? Alas, we shall never know. For later on the zealous public administrator of old Rolf's estate had all the old newspapers--along with the musical compositions and equations--burned before I could raise a finger to stop him.

"What estate?" you ask. Let me tell you. Before we left--that day we found the body--we rummaged around to try to find the names of some relatives. No letters or addresses were found. "I'll get the family bible," the chief said. <sup>"Here!"</sup> ~~"Here!"~~ he finally said, flipping the pages of the old leather-bound family bible he had wrested from the clutch of old Rolf. "Hell, it's <sup>in</sup> written Arabic!" he said.

"Let me see," I said, being something of a dull student of Scandinavian languages. "It's probably Danish." Yes, it was written in Danish, all right. It was Mrs. Ohming's family bible and would not help us find old Ohming's relatives--but might give us a lead. <sup>"Whoops!"</sup> I exclaimed as the heavy blue bible slipped from my hands, the pages fluttering idly as the large book fell to the floor.

"My Gawd!" the chief said, kneeling and recovering a hundred dollar bill, <sup>magically</sup> which had wafted from its pages.

All of us <sup>reverently</sup> ~~suddenly~~ knelt and became devoted students of the bible. Our <sup>sudden</sup> conversion was touching... Before we left we found slightly over seven thousand dollars in currency in the old bible. Old Rolf had apparently used hundred dollar bills to mark his favorite passages. Personally, I am inclined to use old unpaid water bills.

Old Rolf Ohming was buried--in grand style, you may rest assured. That's when I discovered how long his moustache really was... Not that anyone came to his funeral, but I felt that somehow both he and I had earned giving him a bang-up burial. I even ~~refused~~ refused to let the barber trim his moustaches. I felt he'd earned those, too... No authentic relatives were ever found and his estate finally reverted to the State of Michigan. "You mean the entire seven thousand dollars?" you ask. Hell no--I mean the entire thirty-odd thousand dollars left after all of us got our whack...



You see, when the men came to clean out the shack, preparatory to selling it, they first had to get rid of the revolting carbide cans full of suckers. So they dug a deep hole, held their noses, and poured the suckers down the hole. On a last-minute hunch I suggested that the administrator and I should be present. After dismally watching the revolting spectacle I swore to keep my future hunches to myself. Then on the seventh can a metal object thudded and tumbled out that surely wasn't a sucker. The suckers were bad enough but they ~~didn't~~ <sup>hadn't</sup> ~~fix~~ <sup>started to</sup> quite <sup>clank...</sup> "Fish it out!" I yelled. The men scowled and reluctantly fished the object out of the hole. You guessed it--it was an airtight metal container which ~~yielded~~ yielded over ten thousand dollars in cash and securities... The rest of the suckers were sifted with loving care--it made such a pretty picture I just wished and wished I had my Brownie--and totalled nearly fifteen thousand dollars more, in two different containers.

Where did he get all the dough? I don't know. I guess he must have been a miser all his life. We could never find out his background--his apparent education and all the rest. He was a true miser of course, although his preoccupation with music and mathematics, however primitive, was unusual. Most misers find no time for anything but making more money and then gloating over it. Old Rolf Ohming, "The Sucker King," was a trifle different--a sort of rustic poet among misers. One can forgive him for almost everything but the suckers. Did I say suckers?

Sometimes <sup>when I</sup> wake up in the still of the night <sup>I</sup> and can't stifle an ironical giggle when I think of how close we came to paying a farmer ten dollars to cart away those damned cans of suckers. <sup>The farmer would</sup> ~~on that~~ <sup>have made just about</sup> \$25,010.00 on the deal-- plus the fertilizer from the suckers...

## 2: Ol' Rockin' Chair

Rose and Caspar Wright were more typical of the miser in his fullest flower. This beady-eyed pair lived in a tumble down frame house on Strawberry Hill. Rose took in washing and poor crippled Caspar hobbled from house to house delivering laundry and picking up old clothes and whatever else he could wheedle from the sentimental housewives of Chippewa. Both of them possessed what the Irish around here call a "poor mouth"—that is, they were forever lamenting their poverty-stricken lot, until housewives with fine new washers would pull the electric plug and, with a lump in their throats, haul their bundles of soiled laundry to "that poor old Mrs. Wright."

Rose was the first to die and poor old Caspar Wright was so overwhelmed with grief that he did not stir out of his big over-stuffed rocking chair by the window in the kitchen, even when the welfare people ushered his wife's body to the Potter's Field in a forty-dollar casket. After the funeral old Caspar continued to rock in his big chair while the neighbors brought him food and fuel and money to supplement the regular donations by the welfare department. It brought tears to anybody's eyes to see the poor old man rocking by the window, wiping his tired old eyes, reedily bemoaning "the 'ard fate my poor ol' Rose 'ad 'ere on hearth."

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