

Written for *The Flag of Our Union*

The Haunted Church

An Old Sexton's Story

By Arthur L. Meserve

Such a commotion as there was in town when it came to be fully believed that our church was haunted I never saw in my life before, and hope and trust I never may again. It was all that was talked about, from one end of the community to the other, until at last not a child dared to go to bed alone in the dark, and many a grown person was in the same predicament. The church you know is surrounded on three sides by a large number of evergreens, so that even in the broad daylight it is gloomy and solemn in and around it; and since it had got about that it was haunted few there were that cared to pass it after dark; and even in the daytime people took pains to cross to the opposite side of the street so that they might be as far from the ghosts as possible.

As you can see, it is but a little way from my cottage here to the church; yet even the walls can only be seen in one spot, and about half of one of the windows, owing to the evergreens of which I have spoken, growing so close about it, and there, perhaps, it was little wonder that I saw nothing of the ghosts (there were more than one, people said,) until it was noised all about the town that strange sights and sounds had been seen and heard coming from within at late hours in the night or very early in the morning.

The first word that I heard about the ghosts came from my wife. A relative had died in a distant town, and I had been summoned there, and found it impossible to return for a week. My wife could not well accompany me, so when she got a letter that I would not be back before a certain day, she went out of town on a short visit, coming back in time to open the church doors of a Sunday morning; and then it was that she learned that there had been terrible carryings-on in the church while we had been gone. Lights had been seen gleaming out through the evergreens, and sounds had been heard by people that were entitled to credit, and one, more daring than the rest, had entered the yard at the dead hour of midnight, and clambered up to one of the windows, and had tumbled back in great affright, at the risk of breaking his neck, and hurried away as soon as he could, declaring that he had seen a figure dressed in a long white robe glide along the church aisle, and disappear along the passage way that led down to the vaults beneath; and he also maintained that he had heard a sound coming up therefrom so strange and unearthly that it had frightened him more than the object he had seen.

When my wife heard of it a Sunday morning, from Mrs. Jones, a neighbor, who ran in to tell the news, she declared there was nothing in it; that it was the invention of an enemy who wanted to cast a reproach upon me; that I had always taken so good care of the church that there could have been no chance for anything of a ghostly nature to have taken up its abode therein; but when afterwards she was opening the doors, she heard it from the lips of first one and then another, until the good woman came to think there must be something in it; and when, later in the day, the pastor referred to it in the desk, she could no longer disbelieve it, though she stoutly affirmed

that I had not been remiss in my duty, and that as soon as I returned I would dispose of the ghost in short order.

It was on Thursday that I got home, and before I had been in the house a minute I knew by the looks of my wife that she had got something of importance on her mind, and in less than half an hour I had heard the whole, and a good deal more I expect, from her lips and that of Mrs. Jones, who ran in to tell me, as she declared, "what she knew about it, as she had always been a friend to me, and didn't want me to get into trouble," just as though I could prevent a ghost from taking up its abode in the church if it should be so minded.

After I had heard their story, which, by the way, they enjoyed telling, though I think my wife had rather Mrs. Jones had kept out and given her the chance of telling the whole, I took down the keys of the church, that are always hung in a particular spot, and went over across the yard, under the evergreens, to the porch door. Glancing up at one of the windows, I saw that the ivy beneath it had been displaced, torn from the wall where year after year it had clung, and that there was a trampled spot on the ground beneath. So much of their story was true, then; for this must have been the spot where the person had clambered up who had heard the sounds and seen the white figure in the church.

Unlocking the door, I passed in and bolted it behind me, for I did not care to have someone who might have observed my entrance strolling in. I wanted to make a complete examination of every hole and corner within, and I wanted to do it alone. I had come ghost-hunting, and I was afraid that my game would be frightened away if they saw too numerous a party. Every part and parcel of the church I searched, going into nearly every pew, to see if anything were hidden beneath their high sides, into the desk, the singers' seats, and the organ loft, even taking a look into the instrument itself. But everything was as it should be; nothing was displaced, and I came down to the floor of the church, and there lighted a lamp I had brought with me, for the purpose of going down into the vaults beneath, which years ago had been used for a burial place, though the practice had been long discontinued, as the town had increased in size. The one ghost that had been seen had apparently disappeared beneath the church, as was perfectly proper it should do to keep up its ghostly character.

I had not been into the vaults for some six months, the last occasion being that of a stranger who had come to me, saying that he wanted to gain information as to the exact time a certain person had been buried there some twenty years before. He had gone with me to the vaults, found the coffin, with the date thereon, which he was in search of, and had departed, after giving me a liberal fee; and I remembered of his observing, that, to appearances, the vaults were rarely opened, to which I had replied in affirmative; and to substantiate my words, calling his attention to the creaking of the iron door at the end of the passage, caused by disuse, and the corroding of the hinges from rust.

Unlocking the door that led into the passage, and shielding the light with my hand to prevent its being extinguished by the chilling draught of air that came rushing out, I descended the steps, and stood before the iron door, which, contrary to my expectations, unlocked without difficulty, and turned upon its hinges without a sound, while I was expecting to hear the noise that, in spite of myself, had startled me on the occasion of my last visit.

The shadows caused by the rays of the lamp, chasing each other over the piles of tarnished and decayed coffins, that lay on either side, looked ghastly enough, but apart from this, there was nothing to be seen. Everything remained as it had done on the occasion of my last visit, except it seemed to me that in one place the coffins appeared to be placed differently from what I had been accustomed to see them. I might, however, be mistaken in this, so seldom had my visits been; and at last, satisfied that there was nothing out of the way there, I turned to retrace my steps. As I did so, I saw something glittering upon the floor. I stooped and picked it up, and saw that it was a half dollar, bright and untarnished, as though it had just come from the mint. How it came there I could not conjecture, unless it had been dropped there on my previous visit. I had not lost it now, as I had none of that denomination about me when I came in. Wondering that it should have laid there for six months without tarnishing, I placed it in my pocket, and thought no more of the circumstance.

For two days and nights succeeding my visit nothing was heard from the ghosts; but on the third night a man who had occasion to pass it at midnight saw a light within, and a muffled sound, that seemed to come from the earth beneath his feet. He was a man that could be believed, and the whole town was in an uproar again when his story came to be known, as it soon was by every man, woman and child in the place.

Our pastor came to me, and said it was my duty to sift this mystery to the bottom, as I had the care of the church, and that I should devote my whole time to it. I told him of what I had done, and hinted that I thought that it was as much his duty as mine to lay evil spirits that were full of unrest, and offered to watch with him that night in the church; but as he was rather a timid man, he would not agree to this, though telling me that it was my duty to do so; which I did, but to no purpose whatever. The ghosts kept out of sight, and the mystery was not solved.

The next day but one I went into a shop to buy some small article that I needed, and tendered the half dollar that I had found in payment. The shopkeeper bit it a moment, then threw it into the scales.

“A counterfeit half,” he said, giving it back to me. “Where did you get it?”

“Counterfeit! You must be mistaken,” I said, paying no attention to his question.

“I am not. There are any quantity of them in circulation in the town, and some one has palmed this off on you. The police have been trying to get a clue for some time, as it is suspected that there is a nest of counterfeiters in this town.”

An idea at that moment entered my heard, suggested by the words of the shop-keeper. I took up the rejected coin and glanced at it, and my suspicions were confirmed. The coin was dated the present year, and as it was only May, it could not have been dropped by the stranger who with me had visited the vaults six months before. Someone unknown to me had entered there since that time. Was not here a clue?

I went at once to the headquarters of the police and told my story to the chief, and showed the

coin that had been pronounced bogus. He listened eagerly to my story, and like the shop-keeper, pronounced the coin a counterfeit. He told me to say nothing to anyone, but to go quietly home, and to-night to watch again in the church. He had a clue that they were going to follow up that night, and if that resulted in nothing, they would accept of mine, and help me solve the mystery of the ghosts and the uncanny sounds that had been heard.

By ten o'clock that night I was safely ensconced in the church, in a spot in the gallery where I could command an unobstructed view of the body of the house, and where I would hardly be seen, even by the sharp eyes of a ghostly tenant of the place. If they made their appearance that night, they should not escape my glance, unless they vanished into thin air the moment my presence should be detected. I heard the clock striking eleven, and all was still about me—so still, that I could plainly hear the beating of my own heart, and the nibbling of a mouse in a pew below. Now and then the sighing of the wind through the evergreens came to my ears, awakening a spirit of loneliness in spite of my efforts to shake it off.

Another hour went slowly by, and I think that I must have fallen into a drowse, when I was suddenly awakened by the iron tongue of the bell. I started up and rubbed my eyes, and casting a glance down upon the floor below me, I saw a sight that caused me for a moment to experience a decided sensation of alarm. A figure in white, whose robes seemed to trail on the floor, was moving along the main aisle in the deep gloom that pervaded the place. Slowly it went on, and at last disappeared in the direction of the passage that led to the vaults below. It vanished while I stood rubbing my eyes, and frozen as it were to the spot.

Shaking off the fear that assailed me, I rose from the bench upon which I had been sitting, and took a step towards the stairs that led below; but another sight arrested my footsteps. Another figure clad in white moved along in the steps of the other; but this one had a most unghost-like tread. It walked with the sound as that of a heavy person wearing cloth slippers, and I even noticed by the scuffling that it appeared as though they were down at the heel. Of one thing I was assured; it was flesh and blood that I had to deal with.

Standing there, I counted five of these white-robed figures, that one after another disappeared in the direction that led to the vaults. Then, though I waited several minutes, none appeared, and noiselessly I descended the stairs and moved along in the direction they had taken. I had no need to light the lamp that I had brought with me, for I knew perfectly every inch of the way, and to have done so would have only defeated the object for which I had come. As I expected, the first door leading to the vaults was unlocked, and readily yielded to my hand. But a few days before I had locked it, as I well remembered, and it seemed hardly probable to me that ghosts would require an open door through which to pass. Noiselessly I passed down the stone steps. The iron door stood open, and through it came a faint light, and at the further end of the vault I saw a sight that effectually dispelled all thoughts of the unearthly that might have lingered in my mind.

In a space, where the coffins had been piled up about them to give them more room, were half-a-dozen men, at work upon a large amount of counterfeit coins that lay about them in various stages of completion. Some rude benches served as tables and on these some lights were so arranged that they fell bright and clearly upon them and their work, while the rest of the vault was in a state of semi-darkness. The white robes that they had worn through the church had been

taken off, and were thrown over a pile of coffins on one side, and divested of these, they had nothing of the ghost about them, save the locality in which they were. Above the din that rose from their work, I heard my name mentioned.

“He’ll hardly watch again very soon, I think; but if he should, we must either dispose of him or leave these quarters,” said one of the gang, who seemed to be an acknowledged leader.

“Yes,” said another, by way of answer, “but if we leave this place we will hardly find one that suits us so well. Better make way with him if he gets to be —”

What more he said I never knew, for at that moment I was conscious of some one behind me, and the next a violent blow sent me to the earth, and for a few minutes I was unconscious of what was passing about me. The first words I heard as I came to myself, were these:

“Let’s put him into this empty coffin and nail him up. They’ll never think of looking for him there.”

“Yes, that’s a good project, and if they delay in finding him it will give us the more time to get off. It was lucky for us, Jim, that you were a little late.”

“Yes, devilishly lucky; but let’s put the old fellow in, for we must be out of here as soon as possible.”

I tried to speak, but strive as I would I could not raise my voice to a whisper. The demons about me would bury me alive, and I could not utter a word for my life.

Two of them took hold of me, and dropped me into the coffin they had placed by my side. In vain it was that I struggled to move or speak.

“It’s just a fit,” I heard one of the villains say. “Now for the lid.”

It was placed on, and a nail or two driven into the decayed wood. Then I felt myself lifted up and placed on top of the pile beside them. Cry out I could not. I was buried alive.

“Now boys, let us secure what we have got, and then get out of this den as soon as possible,” said the leader of the gang. “Pack everything up, so that those that come here in search shall see nothing to attract their attention.”

There was a sound of people moving hurriedly about me for a few moments, and then all at once they were as silent as the grave. The next moment a cry of alarm rang out and a voice shouted:

“Through the church! We are discovered.”

There was a sound of many feet, and the report of a pistol. I heard a cry from one of the gang, “too late; we are surrounded,” and then a cry for quarter, and I knew by the voices and the trampling of feet that the vault was full of police.

I was stifling in the old musty coffin, and I struggled to free myself. In my efforts as my strength came back, the coffin in which I was enclosed slipped and came toppling down among the group beside me, and bursting, left me struggling at their feet. The policemen started back in affright, but a glance at me, and a few words I managed to utter, reassured them, and they gathered round, eager to hear how I came in that situation. I told my story in a few words, and with a thankful heart that I had become restored to consciousness sufficiently to escape before they took their prisoners away.

A portion of the money and tools was found lying upon the tables, and the rest was hidden in the coffins that had been emptied of their contents for that purpose. That which I had occupied had been used for a like purpose.

The counterfeiters were marched away to the lockup, and from the chief of the police I learned how they had arrived so opportunely for me as they had done. Immediately back of the church, in the cellar of a baker, an entrance or passage had been found the day before; and the baker, upon being arrested, confessed that it led to the vaults of the church, and that both passage and vaults were used by a gang of counterfeiters. They were to meet that night, and, unknown to me, he had placed a guard concealed in the evergreens about the church, through which a portion of the gang had entered, through the window beneath which I had seen the ivy disturbed. They had sought this means of entrance, as at times it was impossible for them to enter the vaults by the way of the baker's and through fear that the police might be on their track. They knew that I was in the church, though seeing nothing of me as they had entered, half an hour after the last one had climbed the wall, they surmised that I had fallen asleep and they were going to call me as they went out. Both means of exit being cut off, they had fallen an easy prey, and the gang was captured entire.

The mystery was solved. That morning, while partaking of my breakfast, I told the history of my night's adventure to my wife and Mrs. Jones, who both gave a little cry of horror when I told them that for a time I had occupied a second-hand coffin. That day the vault was arranged as it was before it was profaned by the presence of the counterfeiters; and since that no more ghosts have disturbed the good people of our part of the town, or at midnight walked up the aisles of our church.

Flag of Our Union, October 20, 1886