

Leaf the Twenty-Third
Buried Alive

(The stories which follow and conclude this series are not details of my own experience, nor are they strictly of a detective character. They are the adventures of various personal friends of mine, and I am certain they are for the most part strictly true. In two or three of them perhaps, the relators may have allowed imagination to supply the place of facts. I have thought them sufficiently interesting to deserve a place in this collection.

J. B.)

“Come, Grafton, it is your turn to tell us an adventure.”

“Oh, nothing has happened to me since I was buried alive!”

“What!” we all cried, in accents of the greatest astonishment.

There were half a dozen of us young fellows on a visit to George Grafton who was doing a first-rate practice in a small town in the State of Maryland. He had insisted on us visiting him for “Auld Lang Syne,” and this was the second evening we had passed at his house. The simple fact is, George was to be married in a day or two and we were there to assist at the ceremony, as the French say. George Grafton was as good a fellow as ever breathed; and we, his fellow-students, loved him with all our hearts.

“I repeat,” said George, “that nothing has happened to me since I was buried alive.”

“Oh, you’re joking,” said one of us.

“Why, I must have told that story over and over again,” returned George.

“We never heard it,” we all cried.

“Is it possible? well boys, light a fresh cigar, fill up your glasses, and I will tell you all about it.”

We all followed the advice given us by our friend, and fixed ourselves into listening attitudes.

“Eight years ago,” began Grafton, “I was studying my profession in the University Medical College of New York. I was a hard student, and having obtained the situation of clinical clerk to the great surgeon Dr. M—t, I determined to merit the good opinion of my master.

“In my zeal I was accustomed to sit up late at night making researches in anatomy on the dead subjects.

“One night I was alone in the anatomical theatre, tracing the relative anatomy of the femoral artery. I grew sleepy over my task, and I suppose it was owing to this fact that I pricked myself with my dissecting knife.

“All of you know the fearful effects which frequently follow the inoculation of the poison from a dead body into a living one. I, however, was not frightened, and sucking my finger, I resumed my work.

“It was early in the morning when I returned to my boarding-house. It was then I felt for the first time pain in the wounded finger. This grew worse, my arm began to swell, and by the middle of the next day I was in a high fever and delirious.

“All the professors of the college came to see me, but they shook their heads and said there was no hope. I gradually grew weaker and fainter, and before twenty-four hours had elapsed, I supposed I was dying and finally became unconscious.

“When I came to myself again, there was a dim light burning in my chamber, and an old woman was seated by my bedside, dozing in a chair. I endeavored to stretch out my hand to awaken her, when to my horror I discovered that I could not move hand nor foot. I tried to speak, but could not utter a sound.

“My body was dead, but my mind was living!

“At first I thought I was really dead, and that the soul had not as yet quitted the body. I was perfectly conscious of everything passing around me; and yet I was utterly unable to make the slightest motion or give the slightest sign.

“And thus the night passed away. The old woman continued to doze in her chair, refreshing herself every now and then by sundry drinks from a bottle, but never once casting a glance at me. I thought this was a very strange way to treat a patient, but supposed she thought I was asleep and did not wish to disturb me.

“The morning at length dawned, and the sunlight came streaming through the casement. But one thing surprised me very much, there was such an air of quietness through the whole house, usually so noisy the moment daylight appeared. As I lay there I could distinctly hear the ticking of the clock on the stairs—a thing I did not remember to have heard in my room before. Even the old nurse walked about the room on tip toes.

“By and by I heard some stealthy soft steps approaching the door, and almost immediately afterward two men entered and approached the bed.

“They gazed on me in silence for a moment, and then one of them began deliberately to measure my body.

“He makes an elegant corpse!” said the man when he had finished, surveying me with the eye of an artist.

“The fearful truth then broke on my mind. They thought I was dead, and yet there I lay as living as any of them, but in a cataleptic state. No words that I could use would express my mortal agony at this conviction; but my body refused to act, and I remained motionless and silent.

“The day wore on; several persons with whom I was well acquainted came in to see me. They sat by my bedside and expatiated largely on my character. My little failings were all glossed over, and numerous virtues ascribed to me which I did not possess. The professors of the college came, too, and mourned over the sad fate of one so young.

“At last they all left, and no one remained in the room but the old woman, whom I discovered had been hired to ‘watch the body.’”

“Towards evening I heard two men ascending the stairs, evidently carrying something between them.

“The door opened, and to my horror there entered two men, bearing my coffin.

“They placed it on trestles by the bedside, and then they carefully placed me in it.

“In the evening more friends came to take a farewell look at me. Again I heard them discussing my character.

“I learned that I was to be buried the next day!

“One by one they left the room, and by night I was left alone in my coffin, with no one but the old woman for my companion.

“I could not see her, but heard her every now and then walk across the chamber. Oh! the mortal agony of that night! Some of you have doubtless suffered from night-mare. Increase the agony you felt on such an occasion ten fold, and you may in some degree realize my sensations.

“That night of agony at length ended—only to be followed by agony still more fearful; for the next morning the house was filled with those who were to follow me to the grave. Once more they leaned over the coffin—and then the lid was adjusted, and I could hear the grating of the screw-driver as it was firmly fastened down.

“I was now in utter darkness—but the undertaker (God bless him!) had not made the coffin air-tight, so that I was not suffocated.

“I felt myself carried to a hearse, and felt the jolting over the stones as the funeral *cortege* proceeded to Greenwood Cemetery.

“The ride seemed interminable to me; at last the vehicle stopped and I was lifted out. Then after an interval, I heard the clergyman read the burial service over me. This over, I was conveyed I know not where. I heard a key turn in a rusty lock, and I was left alone, as near as I could judge.

“For two hours I remained in the same condition, when suddenly I felt a tingling in my arms, beginning at the fingers. Gradually I recovered power over my muscles, I could first move my arms, and then my legs, and lastly my whole body.

“It was then that the appalling horror of my situation was fully realized. I moved my arms, they came in contact with the sides of the coffin. I moved my head, it struck against the lid. I could breathe comfortably enough; but a fearful lingering death stared me in the face.

“A sudden calmness came over me. I lay quietly and began to speculate how long I should live. I began to analyze my own feelings, and determined to watch with the calm philosophy of utter hopelessness the approach of each symptom of dissolution.

“But I soon began to get thirsty and all my philosophy was put to flight. The feeling at length became intolerable and I screamed—my voice did not penetrate beyond the coffin, but returned as it were on myself.

“Then began the combat between life and death. I struggled. I kicked. I beat my head against the coffin lid. I hit the sides of my narrow prison-house with my arms, and endeavored to force out the end with my feet. This I continued for an hour or two, when I began to grow exhausted. A film came over my eyes, a dizziness seized my brain, and this time I thought I was dying in good earnest. During the last two hours I had suffered excruciatingly from thirst. My tongue was swollen in my mouth, and my throat was dry and parched. My breath too, began to fail me. I was suffocating. I was dying!

“I made one more terrible effort, using my arms, legs and body at the same moment. I then felt a sudden sinking, and a moment afterwards the coffin came in contact with the stone floor with a terrible crash. It was shivered to atoms, and I was free without even a scratch.

“I stood up and found myself in the receiving vault of Greenwood Cemetery. The coffin had been placed on a ledge—my continued exertion had forced it to the edge, and my last desperate effort had tipped it over.

“In a few minutes I recovered myself. It was evening. I now went to the grating and began to use my voice to the utmost of my power. I soon attracted the keeper, at first he was frightened, and thought I was a veritable ghost; but a few words explained everything, and he immediately conducted me to the lodge, where suitable restoratives were administered and clothes provided for me.

“In an hour I felt as well as ever I did in my life, and returned to New York that very night.

“When I got to my boarding-house, I found some of my fellow-students sitting in one of the fellow’s room discussing a bottle of claret. I crept closely up to the door and listened.

“‘Well,’ exclaimed one of them, holding up his glass, ‘here’s to the memory of poor Grafton.’

“‘I will drink to that, boys,’ I returned, opening the door and, taking the glass from his hand.

“I can give you no idea of the scene that followed. At first they were frightened, as the lodge-keeper had been; and when they discovered how matters really stood, their joy knew no bounds.

“This, gentlemen, is how I was ‘*Buried Alive.*’”

Leaves from the Note Book of a New York Detective: The Private Record of J.B. Ed. John Williams. Hartford: J. B. Burr, 1865.