

A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL

Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

Volume 27 CONTENTS FOR JANUARY, 1936 Number 1

Cover Design M. Brundage
Illustrating a scene in "A Rival from the Grave"

A Rival from the Grave Seabury Quinn 2
A tale of creeping horror that rises to a climax of sheer terror—an exploit of Jules de Grandin

The Satin Mask August W. Derleth 25
What weird doom made the wearing of that mask so deadly?—a strange and eery story

Horror Insured Paul Ernst 34
Another amazing story about Doctor Satan, the world's weirdest criminal

In Davy Jones's Locker Alfred I. Tooke 52
Verse

The Dark Land C. L. Moore 53
A story about an eldritch woman, so gruesome, so deadly that only the pen of C. L. Moore can describe her

The Hour of the Dragon (part 2) Robert E. Howard 72
A vivid weird novel of a thousand thrills—a tale of Conan the barbarian

Gray Ghosts Clarence Edwin Flynn 105
Verse

Rendezvous Richard H. Hart 106
The story of a ghostly ferry-boat on the Mississippi, and an engineer who refused to drink

Return to Death J. Wesley Rosenquest 111
A weird tale about a man suspected of being a vampire

They Robert Barbour Johnson 115
A dreadful horror waited on the stone slab in Dead Man's Canyon

Weird Story Reprint:

 Dagon H. P. Lovecraft 118
 An eldritch tale from an early issue of WEIRD TALES

The Eyrie 124
 The readers of this magazine express their opinions

Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 East Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. *Subscription rates:* One year in the United States and possessions, Cuba, Mexico, South America, Spain, \$2.50; Canada, \$2.75; elsewhere, \$3.00. English office: Otis A. Kline, c/o John Paradise, 86 Strand, W. C. 2, London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

NOTE—All manuscripts and communications should be addressed to the publishers' Chicago office at 840 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Ill. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

Return to Death

By J. WESLEY ROSENQUEST

A brief tale about the ghastly horror that befell the man in the coffin

GREAT sadness reigned in the little Transylvanian village of Rotfernberg; Herr Feldenpflanz was dead. Here and there, as one walked in the cobblestoned streets, one saw a sudden dampness in the eyes of passers-by as his name was mentioned. Everyone was talking about him, praising his virtues, lamenting his early death; and in the eyes of many a fräulein was more than a trace of tears. He was indeed well beloved by all the village.

"Poor Herr Feldenpflanz," said the tailor sadly, "a fine man, as honest as the day is long. And a learned man, too. He went to the University of Berlin for four years, and knew more than any other man in Rotfernberg. Yes indeed, a very fine man."

The tailor blew his nose with vigor, and his listeners did likewise.

"And poor Fräulein Feldenpflanz! She loved her brother very dearly. She has no one else in the world. What will she do now?"

The tailor and his listeners all shook their heads sadly.

"Even now she sits beside him. For two days she has watched him, lying like life, so calm, and prays for his soul. We all know how he drifted away from God. Those wizard's things that he did in his big, white room! Tubes full of strange vapors and lights there were, and lighting in glass balls. He always said that it was not magic—as if we had not eyes!"

"Yes," said the grocer sadly but with vigor, "as if we had not eyes!"

The village priest sat there also, a little outside the group, with sorrow written on his face; and every time one of the townsmen spoke of poor Herr Feldenpflanz's obvious traffic with Lucifer, an expression of deep pain passed over his mild and benign countenance. He was a short, stout, dark-haired man, and wore the vestments of his calling. He sat very calm and still. At last he could no longer listen without speaking his mind.

"Please, please," he said softly, "say no more of our good friend. He is now, I hope, among the blessed saints, and we must speak only well of the dead. Remember, he was a good man; perhaps he strayed without knowing that he was ensnared by the Enemy's wiles. If that be so, there is salvation for him. Let us not speak of Herr Feldenpflanz; let us not use our human judgment; let us rather pray with the Fräulein Feldenpflanz, who even now prays beside her brother's coffin."

So saying, he got up from his chair and motioned to the men gathered there in the tailor's store to follow him. They did so: the grocer, the tailor, the blacksmith, the butcher and the mayor. They climbed the steep mountain path with energy and puffing, and said nothing. The evening dew lay heavy on the long, wild grass; and from overhead fell cool drops from the leaves of the thick, ancient oaks growing on the mountainside. That cool, calm, mountain hush had descended with the twilight. It was as though a great, blue, star-sprinkled bowl had been

inverted and placed upon the earth, with the summit of the mountain touching its spangled center.

Suddenly the priest spoke to his companions.

"See, my friends, there lies the Feldenpflanz dwelling. When we enter let us conduct ourselves with fitting dignity and propriety. We must not speak to the bereaved *fräulein* when we enter, but gather around the coffin and pray with her. We must not disturb her."

So it was. The big house, white-painted and gabled and surrounded by gardens, lay just before them. Marring the pure, solid color of the walls and the big front door hung a significant black ribbon. The calm hush was very pronounced here. In a window near the front door there twinkled a single electric light, the only one in the town of Rotfernberg. The unschooled villagers had always been amazed by the electric fixtures and the apparatus in Feldenpflanz's home and laboratory.

All silent, the group of men reached the end of the path and tried the door. It was open, and quietly they entered, Father Josef in the lead. They passed through a long, dark hall, at the end of which was a door leading into the parlor. Light gleamed through the crack along the floor. As they approached they heard the muffled sound of low praying, mingled with sobs.

Father Josef opened the door carefully and tiptoed in, followed by the five other villagers. They crossed themselves in unison.

By a simple, black coffin of wood knelt *Fräulein* Feldenpflanz. Under her knees was a cushion to make possible long vigils. Her face was hidden by her long, black hair, and her head hung low over the bier. Her pale lips moved constantly. At the head of the coffin, in spite of the

electric light, burned a candle; the whole coffin itself was covered with mountain blooms. The heavy, cloying odor peculiar to death did not hang in the air, however. The kneeling woman cast one vacant, tearful glance at the entering men and resumed her former attitude.

The six men came close to the coffin and gazed down upon its occupant. There lay Herr Feldenpflanz, calm and handsome and indeed very life-like, dressed in a suit made by the tailor himself. They all knelt around the bier and prayed. . . .

AS HE lay there, Feldenpflanz, terrified by his predicament, could think of only one thing—escape. And one word echoed and re-echoed through his brain—catalepsy, catalepsy! . . .

For hours he had been forced to listen to his sister's prayers and tears; long hour after hour he heard his death mourned, and was unable to move. He felt his own heart-beat, very slow and very gentle so that no one would be able to detect it; but it sent the blood through his numbed brain, sustaining consciousness, so that, aware of all that went on, he could know the pangs of mortal fear and the bitter-sweet of faint hope. "Help! Help!" he tried to shout, but his mind alone formed the words; his lips defied his will.

An educated man, he knew the danger of his state. A chance existed that he might regain control of his limbs before he was buried—buried alive. Consciousness was a good sign, he knew. If now he could force his body to obey his will, the final stage of recovery from this dreadful malady, he would be saved; he would return to the world he loved, to life and living, to his sister Maria.

And then a terrifying thought flashed through his head. He realized that inevitably, if not soon, the air in his coffin would be exhausted! The oxygen of the

air was slowly being used up; for although he did not move his chest, did not breathe, the air was entering and leaving his lungs by diffusion. If he could only move, a tap on the side of the box would attract attention and effect his release. Was he doomed to impotence and burial alive? The poor superstitious folk of Rotfernberg, including his sister, would probably flee in terror. It would be hopeless, then, even if he did recover the use of his limbs. They would leave him to struggle futilely in his flower-bedecked prison! Oh, why were these people not educated? Why must they confine themselves to a home and a mountainside?

Gradually he fell into a dreamy, reflective state, in which the first sharp agony of terror had dissolved away from sheer exhaustion; and only two hopes remained in his mind, like brilliant butterflies that rested for a brief moment on a withered flower. First, he must move; and second, his sister must not be afraid; she must set him free from his narrow prison. And these two hopes, bitter for their improbability and sweet for their possibility, were all for which he existed. . . .

To his ears still came the muffled voice of Maria, hoarse and weary from long use; through his eyelids the vigil-light shone. Suddenly he heard the sound of feet in the room where he was lying. He listened carefully; they were men, he calculated, about a half-dozen. Here was new hope! If he moved or made a sound, one of the men might have sense and courage enough to free him. Then his ears caught the sound of voices praying in unison. So now they too were praying for him!

Several minutes grew into an hour, and then the voices became still, including his sister's. A pang of apprehension ran through him like a red-hot sword. Were

they going to leave him? But no. He heard the sound of scraping chairs and the rustle of clothing. They were sitting down. As he listened attentively, he heard a voice that was familiar, low-pitched though it was from respect for the dead, and muffled by the wooden walls that enclosed him. It was Father Josef.

"Please, Fräulein Feldenpflanz," he insisted gently, "you must go to bed now. You are very weary, and tomorrow you must rise early for your brother's funeral. Please sleep now."

There was no answer, but Feldenpflanz heard the sound of footsteps on the stairs. Maria was going upstairs, evidently.

"Let us hope," said Father Josef, "that our good friend has no need of our prayers. By now he is in Heaven or Hell. Be it not the latter."

The six men sat there quietly, nodding their heads.

"Or Purgatory," added the tailor, looking toward the priest for agreement.

The unmoving man in the coffin almost felt amused.

"After the burial the fräulein will no doubt destroy the unholy things in her brother's big, white room in the cellar," spoke up the blacksmith, who was a big man and who very seldom spoke. "I think," he continued, "that cellars should rightly hold only wines."

So they would like to see his laboratory destroyed! And after he was buried . . . He made a desperate, mighty attempt to move, but could not. Was it imagination or was the air really growing bad? His head began to swim, and he thought he felt his heart beat a little faster.

"The whole village of Rotfernberg will come to see the Feldenpflanz funeral," said the mayor, a tall, thin man, "and I will lead the procession. He was one of my best friends, and hence it is only

fitting that I do so. Ah, well I remember his cheerful 'Good morning' and his fine wines. He was a generous man, too, always giving alms, and he paid the highest taxes in the town. No one was more honest, either. A very fine man."

The mayor blew his nose gently, as he was in the presence of the dead. All nodded their heads in agreement except Father Josef, who was absorbed in a prayer-book. His pale hands stood out against his black cassock, and his lips moved slightly; several minutes passed before he looked up.

"Dear God, dear God," prayed Feldenpflanz over and over as he felt the true death approaching. But what was this? He felt a tremor pass over his body. His heart beat faster, and a warm flush passed over his numbed limbs! Slowly, he felt his will creep down the sleeping nerves into his extremities. Very soon now, he hoped, freedom would be his.

"Let us go now," said the priest, and a pang of terror passed through the man in the coffin. He heard the scraping of chairs and the shuffling of feet. Now was the moment! Now he must move! The beating of his heart was tumultuous; his finger-tips were tingling; his face felt hot and his head full of blood. He heard the footsteps cease; they had evidently paused over him. He heard the rustle of clothing as they rubbed against the coffin. Then the butcher spoke, in a strained tone.

"How very life-like indeed! His face flushes with blood!"

Feldenpflanz made a supreme effort of will. The darkness seemed to shake—and his eyes were open! Above him he saw six faces in a frozen tableau.

Father Josef wore a look of utmost horror and shock.

The tailor's face, long and pale and drawn, wore an expression of fear and shocked suspicion.

The butcher opened eyes and mouth wide.

The grocer crossed himself again and again, his lips moving in frantic prayer.

The blacksmith, more afraid of the supernatural than the rest, closed his eyes, gasped, and staggered back.

The mayor stared for a moment with bulging eyes, then bawled out a single word:

"Vampire!"

Then there came the sound of running and shouting, and Feldenpflanz saw the faces disappear from above his prostrate form, except that of Father Josef, who was reading a Latin invocation from his prayer-book.

THE cataleptic victim, now desperate, heard the noise of many feet running toward him, and the faces of the blacksmith and the butcher burst into view above him. There was a sound of fumbling at the side of the coffin, and then—the lid was raised. He was saved!

But what was this? The butcher had placed a knife against his left side, and the blacksmith raised a hammer high. There came to his ears the monotone of Father Josef's Latin prayer.

Feldenpflanz made inarticulate sounds.

"No, n', huh, huh, help, no!"

The hammer rose and fell. One! Two! Three!

Herr Feldenpflanz ceased to think of escape.

