

Mrs. Henderson's Cemetery Dance

by Carrie Cuinn

It was a fine Spring day, but the mangy dog had no need for blue skies or warm weather; he had a bone and was intent on keeping it. He ran down the dirt path, leaping over fallen tree limbs and darting around tall weeds, for the path was not well tended in those days, and the dog was in a hurry. His delicious bone was clutched tightly in his jaws, and the bone's owner was not far behind him.

The dog, a stray who prowled around the edges of the village looking for scraps, had no name. The bone's owner, who had been buried in the little cemetery on the hill for about three years now, was named Mr. Liu, and it was his forearm which the dog had dug up and run off with. That Mr. Liu was now quite unhappy should be of no surprise to anyone. It's hard to give up a part of yourself, especially when you are still attached to it. That he pulled himself out of his grave with his remaining arm is, perhaps, a little surprising, but even in life Mr. Liu was a person who hated to part with anything. His death was believed to have been caused by the close proximity of his many belongings and found objects,

with which he filled his tiny home, but in fact he had contracted food poisoning from a bad batch of meat-filled pastries.

The village baker had, upon hearing of the old man's death, donated both a berry pie and a honey apple cobbler to the wake, so Mr. Liu had considered the matter settled. Sure, the baker was not fastidious when it came to keeping his kitchen clean, but he was a kind and jolly person, with no ill intent in him. Instead of haunting the man, Mr. Liu had gone quietly to his grave and slept there, undisturbed, ever since.

Well, until the dog came along.

It was little Mary Herbert who first saw the dog, but not the shambling corpse which chased him. The dog jumped over her washing bucket, shaking clumps of dirt into the water and onto the under-dress she had just scrubbed clean. She screamed, the high pitched wail of a nine-year-old who'd been wronged. Her mother, the plump Mrs. Herbert, looked over from the line where she'd been hanging clothes to dry and saw not the dog but Mr. Liu.

"My arm!" Mr. Liu pointed his remaining arm at the

fleeing dog.

Mrs. Herbert paid no attention to the thieving beast, and paid far too much attention to Mr. Liu. Her heartbeat quickened, her breath caught in her chest, and she fainted with a loud thump.

Realizing that he'd never catch up to the dog at this rate, Mr. Liu stopped next to Mary, who was looking down at her mother's prone form. "Dog took my arm," he said to the girl.

"Took my bread last week. Right after I buttered it," she replied.

"That's a bad dog," Mr. Liu said, and they both sighed.

"What's going on here?" Mr. Herbert, the village cobbler, asked as he rounded the corner, slightly out of breath from having run outside at the sound of his daughter's screams. He blanched as Mr. Liu looked at him but had the good sense not to faint. One Herbert flat on the ground was probably all that the situation required.

"Dog took his arm," Mary said, pointing at the corpse standing next to her. "And got dirt in my washing tub. Oh, and mother fell over. She's sleeping, I think." They all three looked down at Mrs. Herbert, who was starting to open her

eyes.

“Excuse me, sir ...” Mr. Herbert began. Other villagers had arrived and were crowding around the strange scene. Mrs. Henderson, the poor widow who lived next door, helped Mrs. Herbert to her feet while Mr. Herbert searched for the right words. “Not to be rude, sir, but aren’t you meant to be dead?”

Mr. Liu blinked. “I *am* dead.”

“Ah, but what I mean to say,” Mr. Herbert countered, “is that aren’t you meant to be buried?”

“I was buried,” Mr. Liu acknowledged.

“Right, yes, of course,” Mr. Herbert replied. “I was there, you know. Fine ceremony. One of the last we had at the old cemetery, before we dug that new one behind the church. It’s just that ... I believe that you were meant to *stay* buried.”

“Dog took his arm,” Mary said again, helpfully.

“Yes, exactly. The dog took my arm,” Mr. Liu said. “I don’t think that’s the sort of thing one should just let stand.”

“That would be hard to ignore,” Mrs. Blackstone, the schoolteacher, said. The crowd murmured, nodding their heads.

“It’s agreed that we understand why you ... rose up, as it were,” Mr. Wenzlaff, the village’s mayor said. “Now, in the interest of civic peace, what can we do to get you to go back?”

“Back to being dead?” Mr. Liu asked.

“No, it’s clear that you’re *still* dead,” Mr. Herbert said, glancing down at Mr. Liu’s rotting clothing and missing arm with a frown, until he caught the dead man looking at him. “Sorry,” he mumbled.

“I think they mean for you to go back to your grave, sir,” Mrs. Henderson said quietly. As a young woman whose new husband had gone off to war and not come back, she knew a thing or two about being unwanted in this village.

“You can’t send him back without his arm,” a voice called from the back of the crowd. There was some commotion as the villagers backed away from the speaker, until everyone could clearly see the strange man who’d spoken. His face had rotted away, leaving only a few bits of skin and hair atop his ivory skull. Bare skulls were notoriously hard to identify in those days.

Mrs. Herbert moaned and fainted again, slipping from

Mrs. Henderson's frail arms like a sack of potatoes.

"Sorry we're late, Mr. Liu," the skeleton said. He was joined by two more corpses, one of whom had to be helped along by his friend. "Mr. Angeli can't keep up, since that runaway cart shattered his leg."

Mr. Angeli held up a dismembered hand. "I got this, though, Mr. Liu. I thought you'd be wanting it back."

Preacher Angeli, the corpse's son, moved to the front of the crowd. "What abomination is this?" he cried in his fiery, Sunday-sermon voice. "What demons have brought you forth?"

"No demons, son," Mr. Angeli replied.

"I think we've pretty well established that it was a dog," Mr. Liu said.

"I command thee, in the name of the Lord, to be gone from this place!" Preacher Angeli shouted, raising his Bible aloft.

Nothing happened.

The dead men looked about. More nothing.

The villagers shuffled on their feet, a little uncomfortable about the lack of Divine intervention.

“Now, son, I know we didn’t always get along, but that was a bit rude,” Mr. Angeli said quietly.

The other dead fellow, the one who was holding him up, looked sternly at the preacher. “You’ve hurt his feelings. He does nothing but talk about how proud he is of you, you know.”

“Look, we need to find a resolution,” said the mayor. “We can’t have dead relatives showing up all day. What can we give you so that you’ll go away?”

“Besides my arm?” Mr Liu asked.

“Yes, yes, besides your arm. No offense, but I’m certain that dog isn’t giving it back.” The mayor crossed his arms over his wide chest. “What else can we give you? You must want something.”

“I could use a new pair of pants,” Mr. Liu said. “I had several. I’ll just go home and change.”

“No!” yelled Mrs. Nickerson. She was a large woman with several small children milling around her and another in her arms. “You can’t. You stay away from my house.”

“The village sold it to her husband when you died, Mr. Liu,” the mayor said. “You didn’t have any heirs.”

“What about all of my things?” the one-armed corpse asked.

The Mayor shrugged. “Sold, or given away. You weren’t around to complain.”

“So you’re trying to send the man away without his arm or his pants,” the bald skeleton said. “At least I have the comfort of knowing that my household goods went to my son. Is he at home, do you think?”

“What is your name?” the schoolteacher asked. She had lived in the village her whole life, and was well liked by the children.

“Alton Smith,” the skeleton replied. “I was the Mayor myself, once upon a time.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” Mrs. Blackstone said with a sad tone. “Your house burnt to the ground about ten years ago, and your son moved with his wife into the city.”

The skeleton shook his head. “This day is turning out to be quite a disappointment.”

“I can give you a pair of pants, Mr. Liu,” Mrs. Henderson said. The others turned to look at her where she stood next to the fallen Mrs. Herbert, who was (still) lying

on the ground and occasionally opening one eye to see if the dead men had left yet. “My husband would not mind, I don’t think.”

“Will that satisfy you men?” the mayor asked. “Would you leave us then, in peace?”

“We’ll think about it,” Mr. Smith said. “Come along, boys. Let us go back to the others and discuss the matter.”

“I’ll bring you the pants,” Mrs. Henderson said, and Mr. Liu nodded.

“Thank you,” he said to her before turning to join the others as they shambled back up the hill to the old cemetery.

“We need to have a meeting ourselves,” the mayor said, once the corpses were out of earshot, and the villagers agreed.

Later that day, Mrs. Henderson walked slowly up the hill. She was carrying a large, heavy, sack, and she walked alone. No one would accompany her out of fear of having to face the fact that their dead relations were in a sociable mood. As she climbed the dirt path, she saw that the wood fence around the hallowed ground was falling down in places, and creeping vines had grown over many of the head

stones.

A bird passed overhead. She stopped to watch it as it flew away, out of the valley.

“I wasn’t sure that you would come,” Mr. Liu called as he walked out of the cemetery to meet her.

Mrs. Henderson waved, shouldered her heavy bag again, and trudged up to meet him.

“I brought everything that my husband left behind. I thought the others might have need of new clothes as well.”

He smiled at her, his rotting face pulling oddly, but he meant it kindly, so that’s how she took it.

Inside the cemetery, she set her bag on top of a large stone and looked around. A few dozen people stood together or sat nearby while Mr. Smith spoke. Seeing the living arrival, he herded the group to her, and she soon found herself surrounded by animated corpses. Some were, like Mr. Liu, fresh enough to wear skin and stand upright, and others were like Mr. Smith – skeletons stripped bare of any identifying features. Mr. Liu explained about the clothes, and the bag was opened and pants and shirts and socks handed out.

“I brought this for your hand.” Mrs. Henderson gave Mr. Liu a belt with a brown leather pouch on it. “You can carry it with you until you find your arm.”

“Have you spotted the dog?” he asked hopefully, but she shook her head.

Other corpses sighed and patted his back and made encouraging remarks like, “He’s sure to leave the bone once he’s gotten the meat off of it,” and, “I bet he gets sick of the taste of your old flesh and drops it straight away!”

“You are very kind to us,” Mr. Smith said to the young widow. “Can you afford to part with these things?” The others paused in their trying on of garments and started to hand them back at once.

“No, please keep them,” she insisted. “I did try to sell these clothes, last year when the winter was very cold and I was sure my husband wasn’t coming home, but Mrs. Nickerson put it around that buying a dead man’s clothes would bring bad luck, and so no one wanted them after that.”

An old woman, her face and hands chewed by insects, creaked as she put a pair of warm woolen socks on her bare

feet. “I appreciate your husband’s clothes, my dear,” she said, and the others agreed, piling thanks upon Mrs. Henderson until she smiled shyly and insisted that they stop.

After some hours of listening to the dead tell stories about missed lovers and favorite pets and the sad state of the cemetery, she returned to the village just after nightfall.

Mayor Wenzlaff and several of the important men of the village were waiting for her.

“Did they tell you what they wanted?” the mayor asked.

“Did they say they would leave us alone?” Mr. Herbert asked.

“How many of the demons are there?” Preacher Angeli asked in a loud voice.

“No, no, and about 30, I think,” she answered.

The mayor made a grumbling noise and Preacher Angeli’s eyes bulged, his jaw dropping open.

“Though they don’t seem to be demons,” she added when it looked like the man might be having some kind of fit. “I think they’re lonely, if you don’t mind my saying so. Maybe if we went up to the cemetery more, they would feel wanted again and go back to their rest.”

“Ridiculous.” Mr. Herbert snorted. “We can’t send a woman to do this, Mayor Wenzlaff. We have to march up there and tell those monsters that they’re not allowed to roam about!”

“Why don’t you tell me yourself?” Mr. Smith called from the darkness. He walked into view, the edges of his skull catching the lantern light and making him look even less human. Behind him, several other corpses shuffled into the light. “We’re here to make our demands, unless you had something else unfortunate to say?” When none of the men answered, he continued. “We know we’re not wanted here, though many of you eat from the crops we first planted and live in houses we helped to build. We can’t help that we’ve been woken from our long sleep but we will not go quietly back.”

“What do you want of us?” Mr. Owen, the baker, asked.

“We want our things,” Mr. Liu said. “Or, if we can’t have them, we want other things that are just as good.”

“We want the proper respect due to the dead,” Mr. Smith said, looking at Mr. Liu, who shrugged and said, “Well, that would be good too.”

“And when you have all of that, you will leave us alone?” the mayor asked.

“Yes, we promise,” Mr. Smith said. “We want the cemetery cleaned up and the fence mended.”

The men agreed that the grounds could be kept nicer.

“We want our treasures back, the gold and jewels that were given to our ungrateful children.”

“Wait, now, we don’t have all of those items anymore,” Mr. Herbert said. “Some of your descendants have moved out of the village.”

“We’ll take whatever you have,” Mr. Liu said, “as long as every person in the village brings us something.”

The men talked amongst themselves for a moment and then agreed that yes, there were some little pieces of precious metals and gems, hidden away in hope chests and behind loose fireplace stones, that could be given to the dead.

“And we want a party,” Mr. Smith said.

“You want what?” the mayor asked.

“A party. With food and music and everyone must attend. Tomorrow night, actually.”

No one spoke for a long time, though Preacher Angeli

did shut his mouth.

“I ... I could make meat pies,” Mr. Owen said, finally.

“No,” Mr. Liu said. “I don’t think that would be a good idea at all. How about a cake?”

“My blackberry cake is very good,” Mr. Owen suggested, and it was agreed.

“Anything else?” the mayor asked wearily.

“A horse,” said the old woman wearing Mr. Henderson’s socks. “And a cart.”

“What?” Mr. Smith and the mayor asked at the same time, with about the same amount of confusion.

“You know,” said the old woman, “in case we want to *go* somewhere.”

“Oh, yes,” Mr. Smith said. “Of course. We need a horse and cart, absolutely.”

“And that’s everything? We give you all of this, and you won’t come into the village again?”

“Definitely,” Mr. Smith said, holding out his gleaming white hand bones to the mayor. The living man’s face contorted from disgust to an approximation of a smile before he reached out his own fat-fingered hand and shook

on the deal.

The next morning, the whole village scurried about, making themselves ready for the celebration for the dead. The Carreon boys were sent out to pick berries for Mr. Owen's cakes while their father and some of the other men cleared the path up the hill to the cemetery. The littlest of the three boys came back with his teeth stained violet from the berries which didn't make it into his bucket, but no one minded because Mr. Owen declared the haul "more than enough". The mayor made the rounds of the houses, taking donations for the dead.

Mrs. Nickerson had appointed herself the mayor's assistant in this matter, and he found her persistence hard to deter.

"It's a small price to pay for the ability to sleep at night," he said to the villagers who weren't eager to give up their riches. "How would you feel if they didn't leave us, but instead wanted to move back into the village? You'd have corpses reaching their rotting hands into your well and sitting next to you at community feasts."

"Won't you think of the children?" Mrs. Nickerson

exclaimed, clutching at her skirts.

That worked. Even Mrs. Henderson had given up a pair of tiny gold buttons she'd been saving. By the afternoon, they'd collected enough to fill a basket with glittering trinkets.

"It doesn't seem fair, does it Mr. Wenzlaff?" Mrs. Nickerson was turning a small silver salt cellar over and over in her fingers, watching the sunlight reflect off of it. Shaped like a lamb, it had seed-sized emeralds for eyes and was delicately made.

"No, it is not fair at all," Mr. Wenzlaff answered, though he hadn't contributed to the dead men's treasure himself.

"You're a good man," she reassured him as they turned away from the last house in the village. "My heart can be at ease knowing you're looking out for us." Her heart may have felt better but her left breast was uncomfortable, since she'd tucked the salt cellar into her bodice, and the lamb was a bit pointy. "Perhaps you'll save me a dance at the party?"

"Oh, yes, I'll see what I can do," he answered, without any intention of doing so.

With the loot acquired and the path cleared and the

cakes out of the oven and the children's faces cleaned and everyone in their Sunday best, the village gathered the decorations and old man Lindsay's cart and horse, and headed toward the cemetery. The musicians, a piper and a fiddle player, began a cheerful tune as the group climbed the hill.

"Welcome, all," said Mr. Smith, who met them at the cemetery's gates. "The lads did a wonderful job cleaning up the place today - come and see!"

Indeed, it did look wonderfully refreshed, with the headstones cleaned and the weeds pulled. The fence was repaired and painted with a new coat of white. That it hadn't quite dried yet was obvious; a few of the undead guests had white marks from where they'd stumbled into it, but the polite thing was done, and no one mentioned it to them.

Mrs. Henderson helped the baker and candlestick maker set out food and lights, and the musicians got to playing again. The more agile dead began to dance.

"Join us!" they cried.

As the children surrounded the sweets, their parents

paired off. Waltzes were attempted, and a reel was rather more successful. As the night grew darker, the piper started a mariner's jig and Preacher Angeli surprised everyone by kicking up his heels while his decaying father clapped his hands vigorously, and smiled.

"It's been a lovely evening, Mayor Wenzlaff," Mrs. Nickerson replied. Her children, stuffed with goodies, were asleep in a pile under the table. "Shall we dance?"

"Oh, sadly, no, dear woman, I believe it's time for us to go back to the village, and leave these souls to their eternal slumber."

"I was just coming to talk to you about that." Mr. Smith raised his hand to signal the end of the dance, and the other dead stopped at once, though Preacher Angeli kept up his jig for another minute, until he realized the music had ended.

Mr. Smith addressed the crowd: "Thank you all for being here. There is just one more thing that we demand before we can leave you in peace."

"What?" Mrs. Nickerson asked. "That isn't fair at all!" Some of the others grumbled their agreement.

"You said that this was enough," the mayor said sternly.

“We shook on it.”

“Yes, we did, but what was the point of the party, Mr. Mayor?” Smith asked.

“I ... I don’t know. Was there meant to be a point?”

“Of course. Every party has its reason, whether it be birthday, death day, or wedding.”

“And which is this?” Mr. Owen asked nervously.

“A wedding, dear baker. I cannot rest until I have taken a bride.” Mr. Smith said.

“And which of these... ladies... is to be your wife?” Mr. Herbert asked. “I mean, congratulations, of course.”

“He cannot marry a dead woman,” Mr. Liu said. “The, what do you call it, curse?”

“Yes, we’re calling it a curse,” Mr. Smith replied.

“Right then. The curse says he has to marry a living woman.”

Oh, the villagers gasped and moaned and made other noises to indicate their shock.

“It has to be done now!” Mr. Smith cried, his voice mournful. “Or we will never be able to leave!”

The other dead raised their arms and began to wail.

“The curse!” Mr. Smith shouted. “Who will you give us to satisfy our need?”

The villagers huddled together, pulling children behind the adults.

“You can’t be serious,” Mrs. Nickerson said.

The dead quieted, and turned as one to look in her direction.

“We’ll take her,” Mr. Smith said.

“No!” she screamed. The dead moved forward, reaching for her with grasping fingers.

“No!” Mr. Nickerson yelled. “She’s my wife already. And the children need her.”

The dead paused.

“Well, how about her?” Mr. Smith said, pointing at Mrs. Blackthorne. The corpse party moved toward her.

“No!” several people shouted. “She is our much beloved teacher! Our children need her!”

Mr. Owen, who’d had a bit of a crush on Mrs. Blackthorne in his own school days, brandished a knife at the old woman wearing Mr. Henderson’s socks. She tried not to smile as she gently pushed it aside. “It’s all right dear,” she

said. "We'll find someone else."

"How about Mrs. Henderson?" Mr. Smith asked, his hand on hip. "Anyone object to that? I mean, people, it's like you want us to stay for all eternity."

"No!" Mrs. Henderson cried, but no one joined her. She looked around at the other villagers. "You can't."

"Yes, her you can have." Mrs. Nickerson smirked.

The dead fell about her, separating her from the yielding crowd and dragging her, kicking and screaming, into the back of the cemetery.

"You should go now," Mr. Smith said, as the screams quieted.

The villagers ran.

Mr. Nickerson ran back in a moment later, gathered up his sleepy children from under the cake table, and hurried them back out again.

The candles, burnt low, flickered in a light breeze.

"Are they gone?" Mr. Liu called.

"Yes, they're gone."

Mr. Liu and others shambled back. Mrs. Henderson, in the middle of them, trembled, tears rolling down her face.

“What’s wrong?” Mr. Smith asked her gently.

“What’s next? Do you bury me? Do you eat me?” She sobbed but remained standing. “Get it over with, whatever it is.”

“Of course we’re not, dear.” The old woman handed Mrs. Henderson a mostly clean hankie. “That was just to get the rest of those people out of here in a hurry. Worked, too.”

“You are kind, Mrs. Henderson. We wanted to do something nice for you.” Mr. Liu handed her the basket of treasures taken from the other villagers. “You can move away.”

“You can buy a house of your own,” Mr. Smith said.

Mrs. Henderson wiped her eyes.

“You mean you don’t want me for your corpse bride?”

“No, that was ruse,” he replied. “I winked, so you’d know not to be scared.”

“Oh,” Mr. Angeli said. “You don’t really wink, per se, anymore, Mr. Smith. What with having a lack of face.”

“Damn,” Mr. Smith said. “Sorry about that. I could have sworn I was winking.”

“No harm done.” Mrs. Henderson took the basket from

Mr. Liu, resting her hand on his remaining arm for a moment. “Thank you.”

The others packed up the food and loaded the cart. They blew out most of the candles and lanterns, and gave those to Mrs. Henderson as well.

“Make a good life for yourself, dear,” the old woman said. Mr. Smith helped the young widow into the cart, handing her a still-lit lantern.

“I can’t ever thank you enough,” she said.

“Live a good life. That’s thanks enough.” Mr. Smith slapped the horse’s rump, which was all the encouragement it needed to get away from the several dozen animated corpses.

“Good bye!” everyone called out as she rode away, and Mrs. Henderson waived back at them.

One by one, the dead went back into the cemetery, which was much quieter now that all the living people had left.

“It was a lovely evening,” Mr. Angeli said. “I had a great time.”

“She’s going to give it all to charity, isn’t she?” the old

woman wearing Mr. Henderson's socks asked with a sigh.

"Probably. Come along Mr. Liu," Mr. Smith called to his friend, who was still standing at the gate, watching Mrs. Henderson's lantern light fade away into the distance. "It's getting late and I am sleepy and we should all of us be getting back to our rest."

"Fine, fine." Mr. Liu joined the others as they creaked and mumbled and moaned, shuffling off to their burial plots. With some help from Mr. Smith, who had a stone casket to go to and didn't need to be assisted with his dirt, Mr. Liu and the old woman and Mr. Angeli and all of the rest got themselves covered back up with soft, cool, earth.

A cloud drifted over the moon.

The stars moved slowly across the night sky.

In the distance, the mangy dog howled, and Mr. Liu rolled over in his grave.

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