



Spooky Season Stories

There Was a
Man Dwelt in a
Churchyard



This, you know, is the beginning of the story about sprites and goblins which Mamilius, the child in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, was telling to his mother the queen, and the court ladies, when the king came in with his guards and hurried her off to prison. There is no more of the story; Mamilius died soon after without having a chance of finishing it. Now, what was it going to have been? Shakespeare knew, no doubt, and I will be bold to say that I do. It was not going to be a new story: it was to be one which you have most likely heard, and even told.



Everybody may set it in what frame he likes best. This is mine: There was a man dwelt by a churchyard. His house had a lower storey of stone and an upper one of timber. The front windows looked out on the street and the back ones on the churchyard. It had once belonged to the parish priest, but (this was in the days of Queen Elizabeth), the priest was a married man and wanted more room; besides, his wife disliked seeing the churchyard at night out of her bedroom window.



She said she saw – but never mind what she said; anyhow, she gave her husband no peace till he agreed to move into a larger house in the village street, and the old one was taken by John Poole, who was a widower, and lived there alone.



He was an elderly man who kept very much to himself and people said he was something of a miser. It was very likely true: he was morbid in other ways, certainly. In those days it was common to bury people at night and by torchlight: and it was noticed that whenever a funeral was toward, John Poole was always at his window, either on the ground floor or upstairs, according as he could get the better view from one or the other.



There came a night when an old woman was to be buried. She was fairly well to do, but she was not liked in the place. The usual thing was said of her, that she was no Christian, and that on such nights as Midsummer Eve and All Hallows, she was not to be found in her house. She was red-eyed and dreadful to look at, and no beggar ever knocked at her door. Yet, when she died, she left a purse of money to the Church.



There was no storm on the night of her burial; it was fair and calm. But there was some difficulty about getting bearers, and men to carry the torches, in spite of the fact that she had left larger fees than common for such as did that work. She was buried in woollen, without coffin. No one was there but those who were actually needed – and John Poole, watching from his window.



Just before the grave was filled in, the parson stooped down and cast something upon the body – something that clinked – and in a low voice he said words that sounded like “Thy money perish with thee.” Then he walked quickly away, and so did the other men, leaving only one torch-bearer to light the sexton and his boy while they shovelled the earth in.



They made no very neat job of it and next day, which was a Sunday, the churchgoers were rather sharp with the sexton, saying it was the untidiest grave in the yard. And indeed, when he came to look at it himself, he thought it was worse than he had left it.



Meanwhile, John Poole went about with a curious air, half exulting, as it were, and half nervous. More than once he spent an evening at the inn, which was clean contrary to his usual habit, and to those who fell into talk with him there he hinted that he had come into a little bit of money and was looking out for a somewhat better house. "Well, I don't wonder," said the smith one night, "I shouldn't care for that place of yours. I should be fancying things all night." The landlord asked him what sort of things.



Well, maybe somebody climbing up to the chamber window, or the like of that,” said the smith. “I don’t know – old mother Wilkins that was buried a week ago today, eh?”

“Come, I think you might consider of a person’s feelings,” said the landlord. “It ain’t so pleasant for Master Poole, is it now?”



“Master Poole don’t mind,” said the smith. “He’s been there long enough to know. I only says it wouldn’t be my choice. What with the passing bell, and the torches when there’s a burial, and all them graves laying so quiet when there’s no one about: only they say there’s lights – don’t you never see no lights, Master Poole?”

“No, I don’t never see no lights,” said Master Poole sulkily, and called for another drink, and went home late.



That night, as he lay in his bed upstairs, a moaning wind began to play about the house, and he could not go to sleep. He got up and crossed the room to a little cupboard in the wall: he took out of it something that clinked, and put it in the breast of his bedgown. Then he went to the window and looked out into the churchyard.



Have you ever seen an old brass in a church with a figure of a person in a shroud? It is bunched together at the top of the head in a curious way. Something like that was sticking up out the earth in a spot in the churchyard which John Poole knew very well. He darted into his bed and lay there very still indeed.



Presently something made a very faint rattling at the casement. With a dreadful reluctance, John Poole turned his eyes that way. Alas! Between him and the moonlight was the black outline of the curious bunched head Then, there was a figure in the room. Dry earth rattled on the floor. A low cracked voice said “Where is it?” and steps went hither and thither – faltering steps as of one walking with difficulty.



It could be seen now and again, peering into corner, stooping to look under chairs; finally it could be heard fumbling at the doors of the cupboard in the wall, throwing them open. There was a scratching of long nails on the empty shelves. The figure whipped round, stood for an instant at the side of the bed, raised its arms, and with a hoarse scream of “You’ve got it!”



At this point, HRH Prince Mamilius (who would, I think, have made the story a good deal shorter than this), flung himself with a loud yell upon the youngest of the court ladies present, who responded with an equally piercing cry.



He was instantly seized upon by HM Queen Hermione, who, repressing an inclination to laugh, shook him severely. Much flushed, and rather inclined to cry, he was about to be sent to bed: but, on the intercession of his victim, who had now recovered from the shock, he was eventually permitted to remain until his usual hour for retiring; by which time he too had so far recovered as to assert, in bidding goodnight to the company, that he knew another story quite three times as dreadful as that one, and would tell it on the first opportunity that offered.



