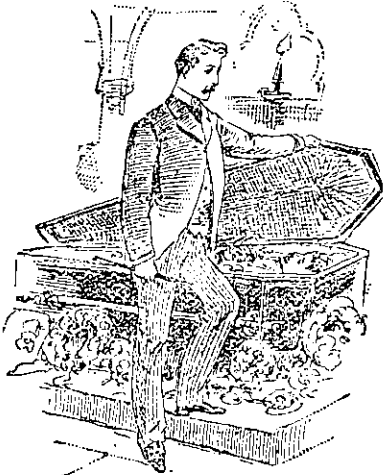


A Dead Man's Vengeance.

By EDGAR FAWCETT.

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One stout wrench with his chisel and the coffin was pried apart.

"I did not know it!" she burst out, clenching both her slim hands as they hung at her sides. "I never dreamed he was dying! How should I dream so? He had been ill and ailing—he had had such attacks before, and I wished a New York doctor of reputation to see him instead of some—some mere country ignoramus." Here she sank into one of the bamboo chairs that were scattered about the piazza, and looked at Gerald with a mixture of imperiousness and malice. "I have only this to tell you, Gerald Ravelow," she continued; "you may be as much in love with Brenda Bond as you please, but if my husband has left you an executor of his estate—and I dare say that he has—then I shall demand that a full settlement of it shall be made as speedily as possible, giving me the share to which I am entitled, for I wish to leave this country and escape from all further insolence at the hands of this arrogant sister. Yes, I wish to go back to England!"

"With Archibald?" asked Gerald, making the two sharp words cut her unfinished sentence like the swift stroke of a knife.

She started terribly, and then stared at him. "How do you know? What do you know?" she began to stammer.

He gave a brief, cold laugh. "Oh, I'm a great deal more ignorant than I should like to be," he answered. And then, feeling that to stay and talk with her like this might be to place within her power some hint of a certain secret it was both his duty and his desire jealously to guard for the present, he slightly lifted his hat, murmured "Good evening," and passed at a rapid pace down the piazza steps.

"To-morrow will be time enough for action," he thought, as he hurried across the twilight lit lawns. A dread which he could not dismiss, however, assailed him with regard to Brenda. Was it safe for her to pass another night at Shadlyshore, with the hatred of Natalie vigilant and asserted. But soon Gerald smiled at his own fears. Whatever evil this widow of Louis Bond might already have done it was sure that she would put no future obstacle between herself and the possession of a noble fortune. Policy would be the potent motive to keep her from all immediate mischief.

For the first time in his life Gerald felt beset by a sense of "nerves." He would almost rather have lost a hand than violate his oath to the dead, but this oath had of late entered his memory with an altogether novel series of thrills.

By 11 o'clock that evening he found himself in a most perturbed condition. His own hope, so closely adjoining the larger estate of the Bonds, had been left in charge of an old couple whom his sudden appearance had greatly surprised. After doing what they could for his entertainment these two custodians had retired to bed at Gerald's urgent request. The evening outside was full of soft breezes and scintillant starlight—summer darkness, with just the least autumnal touch to it. To reach the Shadlyshore vault would require a walk of not more than ten or fifteen minutes. Gerald had secured the key, having long ago placed it in a certain drawer, which he had now but to open for the purpose of laying his hands on what they sought. He had supplied himself with two or three candles and a box of matches. All was ready. His heart beat queerly as he began his little journey across lots and by dark clusters of bushy foliage. The ghastly character of his undertaking was not its only drawback. He seemed to see, again and again, before he reached the vault forms dart out upon him with vetoing gestures, accusative eyes. And how could he explain his trespassing presence in case any such arrest should occur?

But, in reality, he gained the vault quite unobserved. It was built of solid granite in the side of a slight hill. He listened for a moment, and then descended the small flight of steps leading inward to a large metal door. Then he inserted his key in the lock. It fitted perfectly, and quite soon afterward he and passed within the interior of the vault, leaving the metal door behind him just enough ajar to admit a certain quantity of air, yet not enough so as to attract the notice of any possible passer.

He now stood in pitchy darkness. A heavy smell as of fresh cut flowers at once oppressed him. He had ceased to feel trepidation; his old magnificent courage and coolness had come back to him. Slowly he struck a match and

lighted one of his tapers. As the flame struggled from intense dimness into comparative brightness the solemn, stone wrought chamber became clearly visible. It contained but three coffins, each laid in a separate niche. One was that of Louis Bond's mother, one that of his father and one was his own. The last lay heaped over with wreaths and crosses. All the niches were large, and in a manner took from the usual grimness of such receptacles by being uncramped and commodious of aspect.

Gerald had brought a small sconce for his candle, and now set both on the edge of the empty niche, just above the casquet of his friend. He waited some time in awed silence. To open the coffin was an act from which he shrank most reluctantly. And yet his sacred oath compelled him to perform this act. There was only the usual lock to be pried asunder, and for this purpose he had brought with him a capable instrument. Presently he banished his repulsion. "How can there be the least desecration," he thought, "when I am only following out Louis' own earnest wishes? Besides the vow he once exacted from me there is a new stimulus in Brenda's account of that hidden paper."

And yet to spend three mortal hours in this dismal vault! He began already to feel that his nerve power, strong and trustworthily as it was, could scarcely endure so drastic an ordeal. Still he must make the effort. Looking at his watch he discovered that only fifteen minutes of the allotted time had already passed. And yet they had seemed far more than an hour.

One stout wrench with his chisel and the coffin was pried apart. He soon looked upon the calm, waxen face of Louis. How like, and yet how completely soulless and irresponsible! What hope of any vital resurrectional sign could possibly be drawn from this pallor and apathy.

He leaned closer above the still features, familiar and yet utterly changed. He forgot the concealed paper of which Brenda had told him, while he parted from the dead man's breast and chin the thick masses of flowers which lay there. But he remembered, and with a piercing force of recollection, what he had bound himself of old to use every mental effort in desiring and yearning after.

Some of the flowers fell over upon the stone flooring of the vault—loose carnations and white roses, with perhaps a few glossy leaves of either. He meant to stoop and pick them up, when suddenly a strange and horrible thing occurred. The light went out, and it seemed to him that as it did so a sharp metallic sound rang through the dead, abrupt darkness.

And then something struck him, with a light, yet distinct, contact, full on the breast. He lifted his hand and caught a stiff square of glazed paper.

"The hidden letter!" flashed through his brain. "He has given it to me him-