

(editor's note: This paper was transcribed from a handwritten cursive copy with various difficulties. For a perfect rendition, the reader might wish to consult the original, itself a copy, in the volume entitled *Literary Club Papers*, May 30, 1891 to February 6, 1892)

A Successful Wake

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I have never been able to ascertain whether it was the intention to wake the dead or keep the living from sleep. Nor do I believe the participants could have given me any positive information bearing on this question.

Nevertheless, I had (with a capital H) a keen desire to witness the ceremony. A bug until the time of which I write, this desire was still ungratified, forsooth; in every case in which the opportunity offering the cheap attractions at the festival could have been directly accredited either to my personal ignorance or skill.

I also wished to behold the genuine article, not the half-hearted affairs due to the mingling of all classes in our byways.

"The world belongs to him who waits," and it occurred in this wise -- he was an Irishman, some people said he was a clan-na-gael, but he invariably told them that they were mistaken, he was only a Roscommon man.

His frame, fists, and family were all very large -- he worked hard and long -- yet in seeming ease and without an Aladdin oven, he well filled twelve gaping mouths on a salary of Forty Dollars per month which sum he earned as a flagman at River Side. He had two habits which troubled his good wife sorely. He could and did out-drink and outfight any man in the neighborhood.

She told me on the night we waked him that he had been drinking hard all the preceding day and was nearly drunk when he reached home the night before this! She explained he always meant a set-to, with some aspirant for the local championship -- to punish and sober him. She had kept him locked out all that cold night and hearing no

noise, supposed he had crawled into one of the wagons on the vacant lot opposite. The next time she saw him he was a corpse.

The neighbors however, were well aware of the fact that during the night he had put the finishing touches to an exceptionally grand drunk.

About 10 AM on the day after the engine with two freight cars had passed, they gathered the fragments together as well as they could, and awaited the coroner. After reviewing the remains, he ordered them sent home. This home consisted of two rooms on Barnes Alley near the Park Street Bridge. It was founded on the railroad tracks in the old white water canal bed which was 10 feet below the level of the street. The front room was about 18 feet square, ceiling hardly 8 feet from the floor, there were three windows in the room, a large one next to the door, and two smaller ones opening on a narrow passageway. The front step was 6 feet from the top of the retaining wall of the old canal bed -- there was no barrier to prevent a careless child or a drunken person from falling to the tracks below -- the other room was simply a shared attachment -- in the rear, which was used as a kitchen -- the body with some regard for the anatomical position of its different members, was bound with the bloody and stiffened clothing the face partially showing that the features were marred beyond recognition.

The lower jaw was held in place with some bloody rags and all packed with care in a plain, pine box -- which was laid on trestles in the back room.

I went out to look at him, then assured the newly made widow that the undertaker was correct in his statement that if she attempted to make the corpse look respectable, it would be impossible to put him together again. Candles were in plenty around the coffin, but visitors to the back room were few and far between. The neighborhood had been levied upon and had responded generously. There being about one half dozen tables and three dozen chairs of all sizes and patterns in the front room. Lighted candles were everywhere, even on the posts of the old-fashioned square bed, which when I saw it, held about a dozen crying children, none of them over two years of age. They were kept from rolling off by a detachment of four or five larger ones, who patrolled the free side and foot.

The chairs were arranged against the walls, the tables scattered at intervals, on one was a small box of white clay pipes and several packages of tobacco, another held a few bottles of cheap liquor and a plentiful supply of glasses.

During the early part of the evening the affair impressed me as very solemn and formal. Then some fellow, who was afterward called a spalpeen, went out with a huge white pitcher, shortly after his return they all waited for the widdy. The pitcher made another trip, this time the women carried for the dead man, then the proposition was made to sing a "come all ye." This was done. Numerous stories of the dead man's exploits were now told, consisting chiefly of his pugilistic encounters, one of the mourners asserted that had he been in training, he would have whipped the engine and two freight cars. This caused the wailing for the widdy once more. The large white pitcher went off into the well and was still unfractured.

Stories were now told that caused the narrator that turned to me to say, "Dr--Savin yer prisince." Even this little formality was dispensed with, after a few more journeys of what they now called the "growler." There was a sense of fullness about the room and everything in it -- excepting the bottles and that abominable pitcher, the children were asphyxiated with tobacco smoke and the fetid fumes of tallow candles.

It was suggested that Big Barnsey was the only man that ever gave the corpse a rattling good fight, was just the person to step into the dead man's shoes. The beauties of a ready-made family half-grown, were painted to Barnsey in glowing colors. The widow closed this new avenue of amusement by remarking that when she wanted to marry a boy she would send for Barnsey. Thereupon the consensus of opinion seemed to indicate that the beer was on Barnsey. They were so obliging, that before he could get out of the room he had two large pitchers instead of one.

The discussion over the fact that the departed was not in any sense a beautiful corpse was growing quite serious, when an Irish reel was proposed. (Dancing is exceedingly rare at ceremonies of this kind, and only in cases where they have been dallying with some spirit -- other than that of sorrow, doesn't even occur) a set was quickly formed, the dance was fast and furious, candles were strewn all over the floor,

tables were overturned and the candle grease enabled many of the dancers to reach the floor with astonishing rapidity and some grace.

The babies were all awakened partially refreshed and in splendid voice to add volumes to the echoes of the next "come – all – ye."

I was about to retire while I could do so in safety, when in honor of my presence a toast was proposed and they insisted upon my drinking to the sentiment, "May the Devil never know he's dead."

To Hell wid ye! Came in a hoarse voice from the back room and the transformation was marvelous, then a yell, a fearful crash, an instant's silence, a bursting open of the kitchen door and there stood the corpse, with the bloody rags over his face and a piece of his coffin in his hand.

By the piper that played before Moses, what in the devil's name is the meaning of this! I cannot say at this time whether or no the dead man's question was answered or not. I only heard the bursting of doors, the crashing of windows, some screams from the canal bed, where many of them had fallen in a confused heap, and then I realized that I was left alone in the dark with a man who did not seem to know that he was dead and a dozen howling children whose mothers had forgotten them.

I can see the figures on the wall paper, the clock, the empty bottles and the dead man sitting in the doorway, although there was not even a glimmer of light coming through the broken door and windows, I realized and was thankful for the biting air that swept into the room from all sides, but it did not seem to refresh me, all of my senses were very acute. I could hear every sound, many of them squares away. The howling of the children and the coarse breathing of the dead man were apparently the most natural things in the world. I wondered why I did not go out as I easily could have done. I was becoming quite cold, but my hair was wet and the perspiration was running from off my person. I wished in an indefinite way that I was home, yet knew I had not moved-and felt if I did some spell would be broken, the problem, (that's in case I should get out of here, would everything look on the morrow as they seemed to be on that day), interested me.

Then I became curious, "from a faraway standpoint," to know how this thing would end. I am not superstitious but a feeling of shame at my predicament and the want of knowledge of the topography of the alley had kept me from running. After a moment or two, the hushed whisper in the alley increased to a roar, the lights came nearer, then a voice called to me in a loud whisper. Doctor, [illegible] is ye alive? I said I was, but my voice made no sound. "Acoushla" are ye there? Again I said I was. Perhaps they heard me then they came closer to the door, the lights flashed into the room. The corpse staggered to his feet and began swearing again. I saw in an instant what a consummate ass I had been. Rushing to the door I siezed a light then darted past the cause of all this trouble into the kitchen. The dead man was still there, but the coffin had been knocked off the trestles and broken while the corpse had been spilled all over the floor.

His wife said truly, this drunk meant a fight. We had buried a substitute. His opponent, a gigantic mill hand at River Side, had thrashed him to within an inch of his life. Binding up his bloody and broken face he had hid himself all day and sneaked home after nightfall.

The sound of revelry in that home had startled him. Unable to find any neighbors to enlighten him as to what was taking place, he entered through the kitchen window and fell over the remains of his poor sub, in his attempt to reach the door.

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