

## A MUSICAL MYSTERY.

ONE chilly, windy evening, in 18—, three young men sat round a fire in Mr. Simon Shrowdwell's establishment, No. 37, Dyer-street, in the town of Boggsville.

Mr. Simon Shrowdwell was a model undertaker, about fifty years of age, and the most exemplary and polite of sextons in the old German church just round the corner. He was a musical man, too, and led the choir, and sang in the choruses of oratorios that were sometimes given in the town-hall. He was a smooth-shaven, sleek man, dressed in decorous black, wore a white cravat, and looked not unlike a second-hand copy of the clergyman. He had the fixed, pleasant expression customary to a profession whose business it was to look sympathetic on grief, especially in rich men's houses. Still it was a kind expression; and the rest of his features indicated that he did not lack firmness in emergencies. During the cholera season of the year aforesaid he had done a thriving business, and had considerably enlarged his store and his supply of ready-made mortuary furnishings. His rooms were spacious and neat. Rows of handsome coffins, of various sizes, stood around the walls in shining array, some of them studded with silver-headed nails, and everything about the establishment looked as cheerful as the nature of his business permitted.

On this December evening Mr. Shrowdwell and his wife, whose quarters were on the floor above, happened to be out visiting some friends. His young man, William Spindles, and two of his friends who had come in to keep him company, sat by the ruddy fire, smoking their pipes, and chatting as cheerily as if these cases for the dead that surrounded them were simply ornamental panels. Gas at that time hadn't been introduced into the town of Boggsville; but a cheerful Argand-lamp did its best to light up the shop.

Their talk was gay and airy, about all sorts of small matters; and people who passed the street-window looked in and smiled to see the contrast between the social smoking and chatting of these youngsters and the grim but neat proprieties of their environment.

One of the young men had smoked out his pipe, and rapped it three times on the stove, to knock out the ashes.

There was an answering knocking—somewhere near; but it didn't seem to come from the street-door. They were a little startled, and Spindles called out—

"Come in!"

Again came the rapping, in another part of the room.

"Come in!" roared Spindles, getting up and laying his pipe down.

The street-door slowly opened, and in glided a tall, thin man. He was a stranger. He wore a tall, broad-brimmed hat, and a long, dark, old-fashioned

cloak. His eyes were sunken, his face cadaverous, his hands long and bony.

He came forward. "I wish to see Mr. Shrowdwell."

"He is out," said Spindles. "Can I do anything for you?"

"I would rather see Mr. Shrowdwell," said the stranger.

"He will not be home till late this evening. If you have any message, I can deliver it; or you will find him here in the morning."

The stranger hesitated. "Perhaps you can do it as well as Shrowdwell. I want a coffin."

"All right," said Spindles; "step this way, please. Is it for a grown person or a child? Perhaps you can find something here that will suit you. For some relative, I presume?"

"No, no, no! I have no relatives," said the stranger. Then, in a hoarse whisper—"It's for myself!"

Spindles started back, and looked at his friends. He had been used to customers ordering coffins, but this was something new. He looked hard at the pale stranger. A queer, uncomfortable chill crept over him. As he glanced around, the lamp seemed to be burning very dimly.

"You don't mean to say you are in earnest?" he stammered. And yet, he thought, this isn't a business to joke about. He looked at the mysterious stranger again, and said to himself—"Perhaps he's deranged—poor man!"

Meanwhile the visitor was looking around at the rows of coffins shining gloomily in the lamplight. But he soon turned about, and said—

"These won't do. They are not the right shape or size. *You must measure me for one!*"

"You don't mean——?" gasped Spindles. "Come, this is carrying a joke too far."

"I am not joking," said the stranger; "I never joke. I want you to take my measure. And I want it made of a particular shape."

Spindles looked towards the fire. His companions had heard part of the conversation, and, gazing nervously at each other, they had put on their hats and overcoats, pocketed their pipes, and taken French leave.

Spindles found himself alone with the cadaverous stranger, and feeling very queer. He began to say that the gentleman had better come in the morning, when Mr. Shrowdwell was in—Shrowdwell understood this business. But the stranger fixed his cold black eyes on him, and whispered—

"I can't wait. *You must do it—to-night. Come, take my measure!*"

Spindles was held by a sort of fascination, and mechanically set about taking his measure, as a tailor would have done for a coat and trousers.

"Have you finished?" said the stranger.



"Y—y—es, sir; that will do," said Spindles.  
 "What name did you say, sir?"

"No matter about my name. I have no name. Yet I might have had one, if the fates had permitted. Now for the style of the coffin I want."

And taking a pencil and card from his pocket, he made a rough draft of what he wanted. And the lines of the drawing appeared to burn in the dark like phosphorus.

"I must have a lid and hinges—so, you see—and a lock *on the inside*, and plenty of room for my arms."

"All r—r—ight," said Spindles; "we'll make it. But it's not exactly in our line—to m—m—ake co—co—coffins in this style." And the youth stared at the drawing. It was for all the world like a violoncello-case.

"When can I have it?" said the stranger, paying no attention to Spindles' remark.

"Day after to-morrow, I sup—p—ose. But I—will have to—ask Shrowdwell—about it."

"I want it three days from now. I'll call for it about this time Friday evening. But as you don't know me, I'll pay in advance. This will cover all expenses, I think," producing a ten-pound note.

"Certainly," stammered Spindles.

"I want you to be particular about the lid and the locks. I was buried once before, you see; and this time I want to have my own way. I have one coffin, but it's too small for me. I keep it under my bed, and use it for a trunk. Good evening. Friday night—remember!"

Spindles thought there would be little danger of his forgetting it. But he didn't relish the idea of seeing him again, especially at night. "However, Shrowdwell will be here then," he said.

When the mysterious stranger had gone Spindles put the bank-note in his pocket-book, paced up and down, looked out of the window, and wished Shrowdwell would come home.

"After all," he said, "it's only a crazy man. And yet what made the lamp burn so dim? And what strange raps those were before he entered! And that drawing with a phosphoric pencil! And how like a dead man he looked! Pshaw! I'll smoke another pipe."

And he sat down by the stove, with his back to the coffins. At last the town-clock struck nine, and he shut up the shop, glad to get away and go home.

Next morning he told Shrowdwell the story, handed him the ten-pound note as corroboration, and showed him the drawing, the lines of which were very faint by daylight. Shrowdwell took the money gleefully, and locked it in his safe.

"What do you think of this affair, Mr. Shrowdwell?" Spindles asked.

"This is some poor deranged gentleman, Spindles. I have made coffins for deranged men—but this is something unusual—ha! ha!—for a man to come and order his own coffin, and be measured for it! This is a new and interesting case, Spindles—one that I think has never come within my experience. But let me see that drawing again. How faint it is! I must put on

my specs. Why, it is nothing but a big fiddle-case—a double-bass box. He's probably some poor distracted musician, and has taken this strange fancy into his head—perhaps imagines himself a big fiddle—eh, Spindles?" And he laughed softly at his own conceit. "'Pon my soul, this is a queer case—and a fiddle-case, too—ha! ha! But we must set about fulfilling his order."

By Friday noon the coffin of the new pattern was finished. All the workmen were mystified about it, and nearly all cracked jokes at its queer shape. But Spindles was very grave. As the hour approached when the stranger was to call for it, he became more and more agitated. He would have liked to be away, and yet his curiosity got the better of his nervousness. He asked his two friends to come in, and they agreed to do so, on Spindles' promise to go first to a tavern and order something hot to fortify their courage. They didn't say anything about this to Shrowdwell, for he was a temperance man and a sexton.

They sat round the blazing fire, all four of them, waiting for the insane man to appear. It wanted a few minutes of eight.

"What's the matter with that lamp?" said Shrowdwell. "How dim it burns! It wants oil."

"I filled it to-day," said Spindles.

"I feel a chill all down my back," said Barker.

"And there's that rapping again," said O'Brien.

There *was* a rapping, as if underneath the floor. Then it seemed to come from the coffins on the other side of the room; then it was at the window-panes, and at last at the door. They all looked bewildered, and thought it very strange.

Presently the street-door opened slowly. They saw no one, but heard a deep sigh.

"Pshaw, it's only the wind," said Shrowdwell, and rose to shut the door—when right before them stood the cadaverous stranger. They were all so startled that not a word was spoken.

"I have come for my coffin," the stranger said, in a sepulchral whisper. "Is it done?"

"Yes, sir," said Shrowdwell, "it's all ready. Where shall we send it?"

"I'll take it with me," said the stranger, in the same whisper. "Where is it?"

"But it's too heavy for you to carry," said the undertaker.

"That's my affair," he answered.

"Well, of course you are the best judge whether you can carry it or not. But perhaps you have a cart outside, or a porter?"

All this while the lamp had burned so dim that they couldn't see the features of the unknown. But suddenly, as he drew nearer, it flared up with a sudden blaze, as if possessed, and they saw that his face was like the face of a corpse. At the same instant an old cat which had been purring quietly by the stove—usually the most grave and decorous of tabbies—started up and glared, and then sprang to the farthest part of the room, her tail puffed out to twice its ordinary size.

They said nothing, but drew back and let him pass towards the strange-looking coffin. He glided towards



it, and taking it under his arm, as if it were no heavier than a small basket, moved towards the door, which seemed to open of its own accord, and he vanished into the street.

"Let's follow him," said the undertaker, "and see where he's going. You know I don't believe in ghosts. I've seen too many dead bodies for that. This is some crazy gentleman, depend on it; and we ought to see that he doesn't do himself any harm. Come!"

The three young men didn't like the idea of following this stranger in the dark, whether he were living or dead. And yet they liked no better being left in the dimly-lighted room among the coffins. So they all sallied out, and caught a glimpse of the visitor just turning the corner.

They walked quickly in that direction.

"He's going to the church," said Spindles. "No, he's turning towards the graveyard. See, he has gone right through the iron gate! And yet it was locked! He has disappeared among the trees!"

"We'll wait here at this corner and watch," said Shrowdwell.

They waited fifteen or twenty minutes, but saw no more of him. They then advanced and peered through the iron railings of the cemetery. The moon was hidden in clouds, which drifted in great masses across the sky, into which rose the tall, dim church steeple. The wind blew drearily among the leafless trees of the burial-ground. They thought they saw a dark figure moving down towards the north-west corner. Then they heard some of the vault doors creak open and shut with a heavy thud.

"Those are the tombs of the musicians," whispered the undertaker. "I have seen several of our Handel-and-Haydn Society buried there—two of them, you remember, were taken off by cholera last summer. Ah well, in the midst of life we are in death; we none of us know when we shall be taken. I have a lot there myself, and expect to lay my bones in it some day."

Presently strange sounds were heard, seeming to come from the corner spoken of. They were like the confused tuning of an orchestra before a concert—with discords and chromatic runs, up and down, from at least twenty instruments, but all muffled and pent in, as if underground.

Yet, thought the undertaker, this may be only the wind in the trees. "I wish the moon would come out," he said, "so we could see something. Anyhow, I think it's a Christian duty to go in there, and see after that poor man. He may have taken a notion, you know, to shut himself up in his big fiddle-case, and we ought to see that he don't do himself any injury. Come, will you go?"

"Not I, thank you—nor I—nor I," said they all. "We are going home—we've had enough of this."

"Very well," said the undertaker. "As you please; I'll go alone."

Mr. Shrowdwell was a veritable Sadducee. He believed in death firmly. The only resurrection he acknowledged was the resurrection of a tangible body at some far-off Judgment Day. He had no fear of

ghosts. But this was not so much a matter of reasoning with him as temperament, and the constant contact with lifeless bodies.

"When a man's dead," said Shrowdwell, "he's dead, I take it. I never see a man or woman come to life again. Don't the Scriptures say 'Dust to dust?' It's true that with the Lord nothing is impossible, and at the last day He will summon His elect to meet Him in the clouds; but that's a mystery."

And yet he couldn't account for this mysterious visitor passing through the tall iron railings of the gate—if he really *did* pass—for after all it may have been an ocular illusion.

But he determined to go in and see what he could see. He had the key of the cemetery in his pocket. He opened the iron gate and passed in, while the other men stood at a distance. They knew the sexton was proof against spirits of all sorts, airy or liquid; and after waiting a little they determined to go home, for the night was cold and dreary, and, ghost or no ghost, they couldn't do much good there.

As Shrowdwell approached the north-west corner of the graveyard he heard those singular musical sounds again. They seemed to come from the vaults and graves, but they mingled so with the rush and moaning of the wind, that he still thought he might be mistaken.

In the farthest corner there stood a large old family vault. It had belonged to a family with an Italian name, the last member of which had been buried there many years ago—and since then had not been opened. The vines and shrubbery had grown around and over it, partly concealing it.

As he approached it Shrowdwell observed with amazement that the door was open, and a dense phosphorescent light lit up the interior.

"Oh," he said, "the poor insane gentleman has contrived somehow to get a key to this vault, and has gone in there to commit suicide, and bury himself in his queer coffin—and save the expense of having an undertaker. I must save him, if possible, from such a fate."

As he stood deliberating he heard the musical sounds again. They came not only from the vault, but from all around. There was the hoarse groaning of a double-bass, answered now and then by a low muffled wail of horns and a scream of flutes, mingled with the pathetic complainings of a violin. Shrowdwell began to think he was dreaming, and rubbed his eyes and ears to see if he were awake. After considerable tuning and running up and down the scales, the instruments fell into an accompaniment to the double bass in Beethoven's celebrated song.

The tone was as if the air were played on the harmonic intervals of the instrument, and yet was so weirdly and so wonderfully like a human voice, that Shrowdwell felt as if he had got into some enchanted circle. As the solo drew close to its conclusion, the voice that seemed to be in it broke into sobs, and ended in a deep groan.

But the undertaker summoned up his courage, and determined to probe this mystery to the bottom. Coming nearer the vault and looking in, what should he see



but the big musical coffin of the cadaverous stranger lying just inside the entrance of the tomb.

The undertaker was convinced that the strange gentleman was the performer of the solo. But where was the instrument? He mustered courage to speak, and was about to offer some comforting and encouraging words. But at the first sound of his voice the lid of the musical coffin, which had been open, slammed to, so suddenly, that the sexton jumped back three feet, and came near tumbling over a tombstone behind him. At the same time the dim phosphorescent light in the vault was extinguished, and there was another groan from the double-bass in the coffin. The sexton determined to open the case. He stooped over it and listened. He thought he heard inside a sound like putting a key into a padlock. "He mustn't lock himself in," he said, and instantly wrenched open the cover.

Immediately there was a noise like the snapping of strings and the cracking of light wood—then a strange sizzling sound—and then a loud explosion. And the undertaker lay senseless on the ground.

Mrs. Shrowdwell waited for her husband till a late hour, but he did not return. She grew very anxious, and at last determined to put on her bonnet and shawl and step over to Mr. Spindles' lodgings to know where he could be. That young gentleman was just about retiring, in a very nervous state, after having taken a strong nipper of brandy-and-water to restore his equanimity. Mrs. Shrowdwell stated her anxieties, and Spindles told her something of the occurrences of the evening. She then urged him to go at once to a police-station and obtain two or three of the constables to visit the graveyard with lanterns and pistols; which, after some delay and demurring on the part of the guardians of the night, and a promise of a reward on the part of Mrs. Shrowdwell, they consented to do.

After some searching the constables found the vault, and in front of it poor Shrowdwell lying on his back in a senseless state. They sent for a physician, who administered some stimulants, and gradually brought him to his senses, and upon his legs. He couldn't give any clear account of the adventure. The vault door was closed, and the moonlight lay calm upon the white stones, and no sounds were heard but the wind, now softly purring among the pines and cedars.

They got him home, and, to his wife's joy, found him uninjured. He made light of the affair—told her of the ten-pound note he had received for the musical coffin, and soon fell soundly asleep.

Next morning he went to his iron safe to reassure himself about the ten-pound note—for he had had an uncanny dream about it. To his amazement and grief it was gone, and in its place was a piece of charred paper.

The undertaker lost himself in endless speculations about this strange adventure, and began to think

there was diabolic witchcraft in the whole business, after all.

One day, however, looking over the parish record, he came upon some facts with regard to the Italian family who had owned that vault. On comparing these notes with the reminiscences of one or two of the older inhabitants of Boggsville, he made out something like the following history:—

Signor Domerico Pietri, an Italian exile of noble family, had lived in that town some fifty years since. He was of an unsocial, morose disposition, and very proud. His income was small, and his only son Ludovico, who had decided musical talent, determined to seek his fortune in the larger cities, as a performer on the double-bass. It was said his execution on the *harmonic notes* was something marvellous. But his father opposed his course, either from motives of family pride or wishing him to engage in commerce; and one day, during an angry dispute with him, banished him from his house.

Very little was known of Ludovico Pietri. He lived a wandering life, and suffered from poverty. Finally all trace was lost of him. The old man died, and was buried, along with other relatives, in the Italian vault. The authorities of the German Church had permitted this on Signor Domerico's renouncing Romanism, and joining the Protestants.

But there was a story told of a performer on the double-bass who played such wild, passionate music, and with such skill, that in his lonely garret one night the devil appeared, and offered him a great bag of gold for his big fiddle—proposing, at the same time, that he should sign a contract that he would not play any more *during his lifetime*—except at his (the fiend's) bidding. The musician being very poor accepted the offer and signed the contract, and the devil vanished with his big fiddle. But afterwards the poor musician repented the step he had taken, and took it so to heart that he became insane and died.

Now, whether this strange visitor to Mr. Shrowdwell's coffin establishment, who walked the earth in this unhappy frame of mind, was a live man, or the ghost of the poor maniac, was a question which could not be satisfactorily settled.

Some hopeless unbelievers said that the strange big fiddle-case was a box of nitro-glycerine or fulminating powder, or an infernal machine; while others as firmly believed that there was something supernatural and uncanny about the affair, but ventured no philosophical theory in the case.

And as for the undertaker, he was such a hopeless sceptic all his life, that he at last came to the conclusion that he must have been dreaming when he had that adventure in the graveyard; and this notwithstanding William Spindles' repeated declarations, and those of the two other young men (none of whom accompanied Shrowdwell in his visit), that everything happened just as I have related it.