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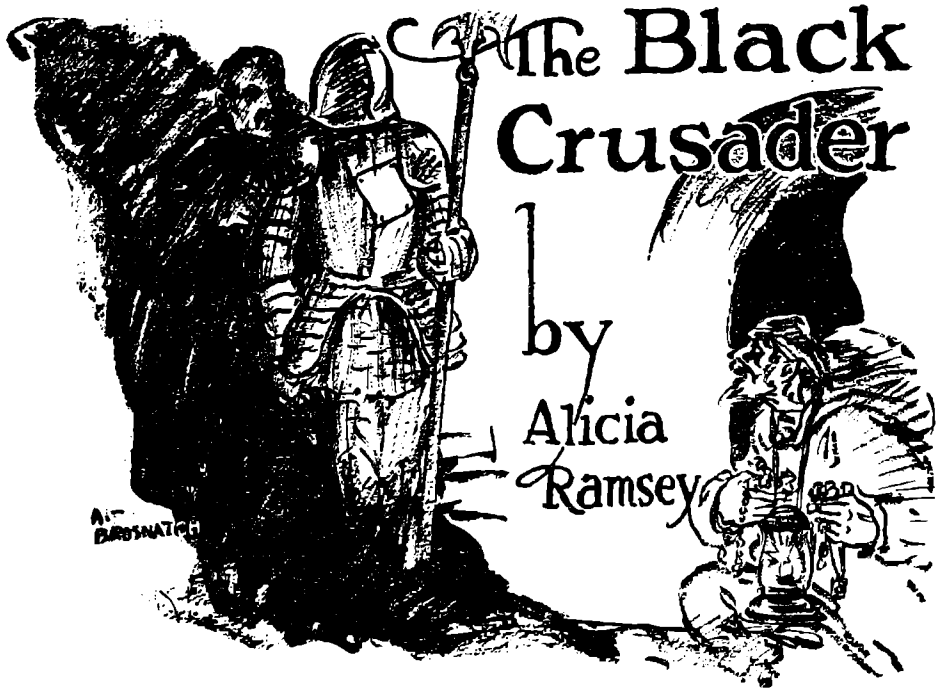
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Contents for January, 1926

- Cover Design** **Andrew Brosnatch**
"Dr. Linn laid the man on the table, strapped him down, and prepared for a weird operation."
- Stealer of Souls** **Charles Hilan Craig** **5**
Complete Novelette—Eery Revenge of Rolf Jaeke, the Hunchback
- On the Dead Man's Chest (Part One)** **Eli Colter** **21**
Four-part Occult Serial—Spirit Return
- The Dead Soul** **Raoul Lenoir** **29**
Evil Entity Clings to Life, Though Its Skeleton Lies in the Desert
- The Black Crusader** **Alicia Ramsey** **39**
He Reached From the Grave to Thwart the Despoiler of His Tomb

(Continued on Next Page)



THE Black Crusader lay taking his rest beneath his canopy of stone, while the death bell in the belfry rang out his solemn farewell to the last but one of his race.

Boom! Boom! Boom! The sound shuddered out on the still night air. The owls, disturbed from their rest, circled round the belfry screeching their weird litany to the dead. The villagers, plodding wearily homeward, wondered to each other if the Squire's son would be home in time for the funeral the next day. But the Sexton tolling the bell, looked at the Black Crusader and laughed.

In the center of the church lay the Squire. Four tapers, sleepless sentinels with eyes of fire, stood at his head and feet. A pall of imperial purple covered his face. The perfume of the flowers he had loved filled the church with their silent tribute to the dead.

In the darkness beyond, five men—white shadows silhouetted against a

circle of flickering light—moved to and fro preparing the bed of perishable stone for its occupant of imperishable dust. The shuffling of their feet and hoarse whispering rose and fell with the falling of their pick-axes and the clanging of the bell.

For one more night the Squire would take his rest among the living. On the morrow he would take his place among his forefathers by the Black Crusader's side.

The Black Crusader was the remote and glorious founder of the Squire's own race. The dusty folios in the Squire's library proved conclusively that he had been a great and grand, if not a good and virtuous man. He had thieved and stolen, and rollicked and squandered and rioted with the best. He had drained the cup of pleasure to the dregs, then, at the right hand of King Richard, he had crossed the seas to fight for his King, his country and his God. In the land of the pagan and the sun, he, who was

set so high, had fallen to the dust. He had taken the oath of the Crusader. He broke his oath. He returned to England, renounced the world, gave himself up to religion, and built the Norman church as a penance for his sin. By his will, he ordained that as a punishment to all time, his effigy should be carved in black and a cloak should cover the mouth which had forsworn his God.

No one knew what the Black Crusader's temptation had been, nor did history record his sin. The secret lay locked behind his lips of stone. It was known only to the dead who slept by the Black Crusader's side, to the Squire who lay taking his rest, and to the Sexton who laughed as he tolled the bell.

Boom! Boom! Boom! There was a sound of wrenching, of lifting, of straining, of gasping . . . then silence. The chipping of the mason's pick-axes ceased with the crying of the bell. The men standing in a circle, mopped the sweat from their foreheads as they called softly to the Sexton that their work was done. In another instant, the Sexton emerged from the darkness and stood by the masons' side.

He was a queer-looking man, was the Sexton. His face was white. His hair was red. On the top of his red hair he wore a skull cap of red cloth. When he looked down he looked like a little child. When he looked up he looked like a devil; all the wickedness of the world seemed to have found a home in his malicious eyes.

"Is it all ready?" said he.

"Ay, Sexton," replied the head mason. "Everything be in readiness. It be toime for we to go."

"In that case," said the Sexton, "I'll let you out."

"Bea'n't you coming with we, Sexton?" said the head mason.

"Later," said the Sexton briefly, "when my work is done."

The men picked up their tools, shouldered their bags and shuffled down the aisle. At the door they paused. "Bea'n't you skeered to stay here alone, Sexton?" said the head mason, jerking his thumb in the direction of the dead Squire.

"Not I," said the Sexton. "Why should I be afraid? There is no one living to harm me and the dead." He watched the masons down the road, then he closed the door and went back into the church.

Swiftly, noiselessly, shielding the lamp in his hand with a fold of his gown, the Sexton went up the aisle and peered down at the Black Crusader's tomb. The canopy of fretted stonework remained, but the bed with its recumbent figure of stone was gone. The Black Crusader, on his feet once more, stood leaning against the wall.

By the flickering light of the lamp one could count the steps which led down to the vault below. There they lay sleeping: countless descendants of the Black Crusader, countless forefathers of the sleeping Squire, each in the house assigned to him, with his name, his age, and his virtues set forth upon his door. There they lay sleeping, an unbroken chain of dust linking the honored present to the glorious past. But a little hour ago, they had been hidden; unheard by the most acutely sensitive ear, unseen by the most discriminating eye. Tomorrow, they would be hidden again, their slumbers guarded by the founder of their race . . . but tonight! Tonight! Gone was their guardian; open stood their door. The dead were free to receive the living, should one desire to enter their house of stone.

The Sexton turned away from the vault, lifted his lantern and looked at the Black Crusader leaning against the wall. The light fell on the burnished plate nailed to the Black

Crusader's breast with its fantastic legend:

Who'er this tomb shall spoil for pelf
Shall toll his funeral bell himself.

The Sexton looked into the Black Crusader's eyes and laughed.

"Tonight," he whispered, "to-night!" Then he went down the aisle into the body of the church.

By the side of the sleeping Squire he paused and with a steady hand raised the pall and gazed down into the waxen face.

"I've waited for eight long years," he said, "but tonight is my turn. Eight long years have been yours. But tonight is mine! Tonight!" The Sexton let the pall fall back again over the waxen face and laughed. "Tonight," he whispered. "To-night!"

The Sexton shut the door of the church and went out into the dark.

THE Sexton's home was a little cottage quite near the church. He had lived in it ever since he had come to the little village of Ampthill twenty years before. For twenty years "Ginger Geoff," as the villagers called him, had lived in their midst, eaten with them, drunk with them, dug their graves and tolled their funeral knell. Where he came from, who he was, nobody knew. He arrived one day in the little place, ordered himself a glass of beer at the little public house and enquired as to the possibility of work. The place of Sexton chanced to be going a-begging, and "Ginger Geoff" had interviewed the Squire and obtained the post. A day later, he had shifted his poor belongings to the little cottage set apart for the Sexton's use, and within a week was as well known as the oldest inhabitant of the place.

There was a good deal of curiosity evinced about the Sexton, not only on his arrival but during the whole of his life. He was one of those men

who at once attract and repel attention and whet the appetite of imagination by allowing it to starve. The villagers, honest, commonplace folk, resenting the intrusion into their midst of a personality so foreign to their own, summed him up in the one word "queer." The visitors whom he showed over the Norman church, noting his delicate hands and the unexpected refinement of his speech, dismissed him as a man who had seen better days. But to villagers and visitors alike the Sexton said never a word. Even in his cups he contrived to hold his tongue.

There were many visitors to the Norman church. Its architecture was unique, its stained glass a revelation, the view from the belfry unsurpassed, and the tomb of the Black Crusader, with its quaint legend, full of old-world charm.

Before the coming of the Sexton, the story of the Black Crusader had been looked upon as quite an ordinary thing, but "Ginger Geoff" had seized upon possibilities of that historical worthy and turned him to good account. The Squire, good, easy man, flattered in his pride of race by the Sexton's interest, had readily granted him free access to the necessary books. A little pamphlet concerning the Black Crusader was the outcome of the Sexton's researches, which, done into print by the Squire's command, obtained a ready sale at sixpence amongst the hundreds of people, who, during the year, found their way to the little village of Ampthill to gaze at and speculate upon the Black Crusader's tomb.

What was the meaning of the legend? What was the "pelf" he sought so jealously to guard that he encompassed it around with bulwarks of fear? Was it hidden treasure of deeds and documents, or was it heaped-up spoil of jewels and gold?

All asked. None knew. Only the Black Crusader and his brothers in

their house of stone; the Squire lying alone guarded by sentinels of fire; and the Sexton who laughed as he walked down the road in the night.

He knew. It was not for nothing that he had pored all those dreary hours over the Squire's musty, dusty books. He knew. He had known for eight years. For eight long years he had waited for a chance to turn his knowledge into account. Death had put his chance into his hands tonight.

As he walked along the road in the darkness, the Sexton began to think. His thoughts were as full of darkness as the night. He thought of the injustice of men's laws which had handicaped him from his birth. He thought of an unhappy childhood, of a treacherous wife, of blighted aspirations, of a withering heart. He thought of the growing lust for gold which had become the master passion of his life.

Gold! How he loved it! How he thirsted for it! How he had starved for it! How he had sat the livelong night brooding over it, talking to it, caressing it, kissing it with the passion of a mother for her new-born child. How he loved to feel the shining pieces slipping through his hands; his hands which were like a woman's for all his digging, supple and soft and white. A miser's hands, so a gipsy girl had once told him at a fair. Recalling the memory, the Sexton looked down at his hands in the darkness and laughed. He was merry tonight, was the Sexton. How should he be otherwise than merry? Had he not waited for eight long years? Had not his chance come to him at last?

The sleeping villagers, the lonely church, the open vault, the secret knowledge, the hidden gold!

Why only gold? Why not jewels? Barbaric emeralds, uncut rubies, pearls beyond price! All waiting! Their shining hidden away in the darkness; waiting to come to him.

How much? How much? That was the question. Hundreds! thousands! tens of thousands! millions! A little courage, a little will, and tomorrow he could sit alone in the darkness and lave his thirsting hands, not in a meager pool of sovereigns, but in a burning sea of gold.

Like the stars in the shadowed firmament above him, the thought of the hidden treasure blazed across the darkness of the Sexton's thoughts.

"One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight!"

The Sexton counted the sweet notes as they died away in the still night air. Eight o'clock. That meant another four hours, for he meant to wait till 12. At 12 the world was asleep—at 12 the ghost of gold should arise and walk—at 12 the grave would give up her dead.

As the Sexton crossed the threshold of his cottage—a Cræsus' palace in his dreams,—for the last time in his life the Sexton laughed.

OVER the untasted food and wine sat the eldest son of the dead Squire. His boots were muddy; his hands were soiled; his face was white. Four sleepless days and nights he had been on his way; now he had come only in time to hear, for all his hastening, he was three days too late. The father he had loved and honored was gone, and his son, a most unwilling heir, reigned in his stead.

The new Squire pushed aside his untasted plate, looked across at the empty chair which henceforth he would be the one to fill, and his fancy conjured up for him the kindly face, the sparkling eye, the welcoming hand. Too late! too late! And he had gone out into the darkness and the silence, calling for his son. The new Squire covered his face with his hands and cried like a little child.

Upstairs, the weeping women went about their tasks; downstairs, the servants huddled in the kitchen were

already planning for the break-up of the old home. In the library, with papers and pens, the lawyer waited the pleasure of the new Squire.

Let him wait. Tomorrow would be time enough to hear of the mortgaged lands, the failing crops, the necessary sale, the passing of the dear old home into strangers' hands. Tomorrow belonged to them, tonight belonged to him.

The new Squire rose up in his place and summoned the butler who had known him from a child. "Tell Mr. Creighton not to wait any longer," he said. "I can't see anyone tonight."

"But it's so important, Master John," said the old man, the familiar name of boyhood slipping across his trembling lips.

"I can't help that," said the master. "Nothing is so important that it can't wait till morning. I can't stay any longer in the house, James, the place stifles me. I'm going back to him."

"But you've been with him already, Master John," said the old man. "You mustn't go back again. You're tired. You're ill. He'd be the first to tell you not to go if he could speak."

"I must," said the Squire. "It's the last chance I shall ever have of spending a few hours by his side."

"Then I'll come with you," said the old man.

"No," said the Squire. "I must go alone."

As he moved toward the door, the old man threw himself in his way. "Let me go with you, Master John. You mustn't go alone. Look——" And he pointed with a trembling finger to the clock.

"A quarter to 12," said the Squire. "What of that?"

"Wait at least till the hour has struck," entreated the old man. "You know what the folks say round about here, Master John," his voice dropped

to a whisper, "that at 12 the Black Crusader walks."

The young man threw off the servant's detaining hand with a gesture of contempt. "What do you think he'd say if he heard you talking such rubbish as that?"

For an instant servant and master looked at each other, then the old man opened the door. "If it must be, sir, it must. I'll wait up till you come back."

The young Squire caught up a hat, threw a coat over his arm, and went into the night.

The air struck chill, summer though it was, and the young man shivered as he picked his way across the lawn. He slipped his arm into the coat. To his surprize, fumble as he might, he could find no sleeve. It came to him like a flash that he'd taken his father's cape. He wrapped it round his shoulders with a sensation so acute it almost seemed like the touch of the dead man's hand. "Dear father," thought he, "how often I've laughed at you for wearing this shabby old cloak, and now I'm wearing it and you're not here to laugh at me."

Softly he let himself into the church by the vestry door with the little key which the Vicar had left up at the Hall in case he arrived and wanted to use it that night. Softly he walked up the narrow aisle, softly he lifted the pall, softly he bent down and kissed the waxen face of the dead man. "Why didn't you wait a little longer, Dad?" said he. "Just a few hours longer, that at least we might have said good-bye." He slipped his warm, young hand under the pall and laid it tenderly on the ice-cold fingers of the dead man and knelt down by his side.

How long he knelt there he never knew. Was it a moment? Was it an hour? In looking back afterward, it seemed to him as if he had knelt there for all eternity. Exhausted with want of food, tired out with want of sleep,

as he knelt there, he lost all consciousness of everything, save that he held his father's hand. The present seemed to slip away from him. The future did not exist. Only the past was real,—the past alive with the spirit of the dead man. Half-forgotten memories of childhood's days, tender, familiar names long since fallen into disuse, idle words, merry laughter, all rose and lived again. How they had ridden forth in the morning among the glad fields and the gay flowers. How they had played together in the moon. How, when the twilight had fallen, they had sat side by side in the great hall watching the firelight leaping into flame, while the elder told the younger stories of the men and women of their race. How he had slipped his little hand into the protecting father hand, even as now,—the same, yet not the same,—and from that safe stronghold had challenged fear lurking in the shadowy corners while they spoke of the Black Crusader and whispered mysteriously together of the possible treasures in his tomb.

The Black Crusader!

The young Squire lifted his head and listened. What was that noise? Something had moved. Something had stirred. What could it be?

The owls in the belfry, rats in the vaults, or James, despite his fears and his master's instructions, come to fetch him home.

He held his breath and listened.

Silence. The awful, terrible, terrifying silence of death.

Not a movement. Not a sound. It was his own overstrung imagination. His own over-excited brain. And yet again, something moving. *There was someone in the church.*

IN AN instant the young Squire was on his feet. To his surprize he found that he had suddenly no breath. His heart was fluttering like a mad thing in his breast. His eyes searching out the darkness were sud-

denly blind. His ears, strained in an agony of expectation, were suddenly deaf. Putting his hand to his forehead he found it was quite wet.

What was it? Who was it? In such a place, at such an hour? Who, or *what?*

A third time, and this time there was no mistake. The young Squire turned his head in the direction of the noise and saw a spot of light. With a shock that brought the blood to his face, it came to him that the light was burning in the Black Crusader's tomb.

With a sudden revulsion of feeling the young Squire looked down at his dead father and smiled.

Of course it must be the masons who were still at work. And yet . . . at work at 12 o'clock at night, with the church doors locked! Who had given them permission to stay so late? If the doors were locked, who had let them in? If they were working preparing the vault for the next day, why did they make no sound?

And yet . . . there was the light; burning, flickering, moving, as if someone down below were carrying it about. Probably the Sexton, over-cautious man, come back to see that everything was right. And yet . . . so late . . . The Squire caught his breath sharply; the light went out.

Darkness! Silence! Death! No light save the tapers burning, no sound save the beating of his own heart, no human presence except himself and the dead man.

Had he been asleep or had his over-wrought imagination played him false? Yet, but an instant ago, the light had been, and now the light was not. The young man's nerves strained to stretching point, began to go. Then his eyes fell on the dead man's face, and the tension of his own relaxed.

"You wouldn't believe it if I told you," he thought, "but it's true all the same, dear old dad. *I'm afraid!*"

He turned his head sharply. The light was burning again. In an instant all the young Squire's hesitation had vanished. Whoever it was, whatever it was, he must see, he must know. He stooped down, unlaced his boots, drew his father's cape more closely about him, and in his stockinged feet slipped noiselessly up the church.

There was the yawning darkness. There was the open vault. There was the burning light. For the first time in his life the young Squire looked down into his great forefather's tomb.

A flight of stone steps led to the crypt below. The light, which intermittently shone and disappeared, was not sufficiently bright to allow him to distinguish anything else. One thing only was certain: there was somebody in the vault. Somebody who moved cautiously, who was doing something which he didn't wish to be found out.

He was about to run down the steps when a sudden thought came leaping to his brain. Somebody who knew the legend was taking advantage of the opening of the vault to search for the treasures popularly supposed to be buried in the Black Crusader's tomb!

The mere thought steadied him instantly. At the first suspicion of practical, tangible danger he was his own man again. Shielding his face with his cape, he withdrew into the shade. Alert, his eyes fixed on the shifting light, he stood and leaned his back against the wall.

Silence! maddening, deafening silence, then a sound as of stone falling upon stone and a stifled cry. The young Squire held himself in with a hand of steel not to fling himself headlong down the narrow stairway to see what was going on.

Once again silence, pitiless, aching silence; the silence which seizes a man by his throat and stops the life-blood running through his heart. Silence! Then a sound as of falling tears. A strange sound that; this weeping and

wailing and sobbing intermingled with another sound as of lovers kissing, then a voice murmuring all the endearing words known to the language of love. Then a sound as of the chinking of gold against gold.

"They have found it," thought the young Squire, in the darkness. "How many of them are there? What had I better do?"

To call for help was useless, to leave was impossible, there was nothing to do but to wait.

One! two! three! At the sounding of the clock all other sound ceased. The light, which for some time had been darkening, as if removed farther into the vault, flashed out brightly for an instant, then settled down to a steady glow as if sheltered by a suddenly cautious hand.

"They are coming at last," thought the Squire, and lifted his cloak across his face. As he did so, his arms struck sharply against the projecting stone; he turned and realized for the first time, he was standing side by side with the Black Crusader, whom the masons had carefully propped against the wall. Even at that moment, the thought thrilled him to the core that he and his great forefather should thus be standing guard side by side.

The light began to move. Slowly someone was coming up the steps. In another second a white face encircled with red hair surmounted by a red cap came into view.

It was "Ginger Geoff."

Up the steps came the Sexton. A lantern was fixed to his breast, a bag was slung across his back, both hands were full to overflowing of precious stones.

For an instant, remembering all his dead father's goodness to the man, a wave of righteous indignation held the young Squire dumb. Then a passion of anger fell upon him and he strode forward to the side of the open vault and stood awaiting the Sexton.

his uplifted arm still unconsciously hiding his face.

"Diamonds and rubies and emeralds," babbled the Sexton softly, "and pearls, pearls of great price! A king's ransom! . . ."

"Geoffrey," said the Squire.

The Sexton paused on the topmost step and listened intently. His face was alive with fear. "Who spoke?" he whispered hoarsely.

The young Squire stepped out of the shadow into the circle of light. "It is I."

The Sexton stared blindly up into the darkness, then a scream like a wounded animal went echoing through the night. "The Black Crusader!" he screamed. "Save me, save me, save me!" and he rushed wildly into the church.

"You can't escape me like that," cried the Squire, and started in pursuit.

"Save me, save me, save me!" screamed the Sexton. "It's the Black Crusader come to life."

"Stop!" cried the Squire in a voice of thunder. "It is I."

For an instant the Sexton's white face looked backward over his shoulder, then his lamp went out. The whole church lay in darkness save for the four tall tapers around the coffin, sleeping sentinels with guarding eyes of fire.

Up and down, round and round, in and out, the men chased each other, the Sexton's screams in wanton unseemliness disturbing the hallowed slumbers of the dead.

Up and down! round and round! in and out! One instant within a hand's breadth of each other—the next divided almost by the entire length of the church.

A strange sight in good truth! The red-headed, white-faced Sexton, his hands full of jewels, the sack of pilfered treasure looming like a deformity on his rounded back, crouching, springing, running, screaming; and

the tall Squire, in stockinged feet, noiselessly tracking him, through the darkness, his dead father's cape billowing behind him like fantastic wings of black.

UP AND down! Round and round! In and out! For a few minutes that seemed like eternities, they ran their race, pursuing and pursued. then, with a movement of unexpected dexterity, the two came face to face.

The young Squire's hand leapt out like lightning to seize the Sexton. The Sexton doubled like a hare and rushed up the belfry stairs. The Squire, uncertain of his whereabouts in the darkness, came to a standstill and called furiously to him to stop.

The belfry was so constructed that it had two flights of stairs. The Sexton's intention on reaching the top was to cross the narrow rat-eaten landing and escape down the other side.

On, on, on. Up, up, up. Gasping, slipping, screaming, with the unerring instinct of the hunted, the Sexton rushed upward in the dark.

Round the corner, across the landing, down the other side.

Creak! CREAK! Creak! The Sexton stopped short in his running, face to face with the young Squire who was coming up shielding a lighted taper with his cape.

"I've got you at last, have I!" cried the Squire.

To the terror-stricken Sexton it was the voice of one risen from the dead. Without an instant's hesitation the Sexton turned and fled back again the way he had come.

Up! Up! Up! Would he never reach the top? Would the steps which his feet had trodden so often never come to an end?

Stumbling, slipping, gasping, screaming, he tore onward like a man pursued by a horrible dream, and ever at his heels closer, closer, the

dreaded presence calling on him to stop.

On! On! On! Up! Up! Up!
At last the top!

Half paralyzed with the unwonted exertion, the Sexton steadied himself by the rickety rail, paused for an instant, and looked down. On the next landing beneath him came the glimmer of the pursuing light. Only a few steps divided them. Only a few seconds separated him from the supernatural terror which he dreaded more than death.

To wait and grapple with this dread assailant was impossible. To run any farther was out of the question; he had come to the end of his strength. Where to turn? What to do? How to escape?

Often, to save himself the trouble of climbing the steep stairway, he had let himself down by the rope. At the thought, the Sexton bent eagerly forward in the darkness, and the noose by which he had fixed the bell to the landing that very afternoon after ringing the dead Squire's obsequies struck against his hands, which were

full of jewels! Ruling passion strong in death, the miser hand still held them as in a vise.

Stronger than terror, more maddening than fear, came the thought that if he held the rope with his hands he must let the jewels fall.

"I've got you at last, have I?"

Only three steps between him and the Black Crusader!

The Sexton, screaming with terror, slipped his head into the noose and leapt into the dark.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

As the young Squire peered over the rickety railing, petrified with horror, the great bell unloosed from captivity clanged out the first notes of the Sexton's funeral knell.

So the legend fulfilled itself.

WHEN the people aroused by the ringing came rushing in from the vicarage, they found the young Squire standing like a man in a dream, watching the body of the dead Sexton caught in a noose of his own making, slowly swinging to and fro.