There Was An Old Woman

By RAY BRADBURY

I won’t let the morticians get my body—she said—cut and saw it so it ain’t no good to no one.

O, THERE’S no leif arguing. I got my mind fixed. You sashay off with your silly wicker basket. Land, Land, where you ever get notions like that? You just skit out of here and don’t bother me, I got my tatting and knitting to do, and no never minds about tall dark gentlemen with fanged ideas.”

The tall dark young man stood quietly, not moving. Aunt Tildy hurried on with her talk.

“You heard what I said, young man. If you got a mind to speechify me, well, you can talk, but meantime I hope you don’t mind if I pour myself a bit of coffee. There. If you’d been a bit more polite, I mighta offered you some; but you stride in here high and mighty and you never rapped on the door no nothing. I don’t like that kind of doing. You think you own the place.”

Aunt Tildy fussed with her lap. “Land, now, where’d I lay the yarn. I’m making myself a comforter. These winters gets on mighty chill, I’ll allow, and it ain’t fittin’ for a lady with bones like rice-paper to be settin’ in a drafty old house like this without warming herself.”

The tall dark man sat down.

“That’s an antique chair, so be gentle
There was an old woman with it," warned Aunt Tildy. "Now, if you want to start again, tell me what you got to tell, I'll listen respectful. But keep your voice down and stop staring at me with funny lights in your eyes. Land, it gives me shudders."

The grandfather clock in the hall had just finished striking three. There were four men out in the hall grouped around the wicker, strangely quiet and hardly moving, like they were frozen.

"Now, about that wicker basket," began Aunt. "It's over six feet long, and by the look of it, it ain't laundry. And those four men you got with you, you don't need them—why, it's light as thistles. Eh?"

The dark young man was leaning forward on the antique chair. He said, "The basket won't be light after awhile. There'll be something in it."

"Shaw, now." Aunt Tildy mused. "Now where have I seen a wicker like that before? Seems it was only a couple years ago. Seems to me—oh, Now I remember. Certainly I do. It was when Mrs. Dwyer passed away next door."

Aunt Tildy put her coffee cup down, sternly. "So that's what you're up to? I thought you were trying to sell me something. Just wait until my little Emily comes home from college this afternoon. I wrote her a note the other day. Not admitting, of course, that I wasn't feeling quite ripe and pert, but sort of hinting that I'd like to see her again, it's been a bunch of weeks. She living in New York and all. Almost like my own daughter, Emily is.

"Now, she'll take care of you. She'll shoo you out'n this parlor so quick it'll—"

"Aren't you tired?" asked the dark young man.

"No, I'm not."

"It would be so nice for you to rest," said the dark young man.

"Great sons of Gosehen on the Gilbery Dike! I got a hundred comforters, two hundreds of sweaters and six hundred pot-holders left in these skinny fingers fumbling with clicking needles and bright yarns. You go away and come back when I'm done, and maybe I'll talk to you." Aunt Tildy shifted subjects. "Let me tell you about Emily. She's such a sweet, fair child.

Aunt Tildy nodded thoughtfully. Emily, with hair like the tassles of light yellow corn, just as soft and sweet.

"I well remember the day her mother died, twenty years ago, leaving Emily to my house. That's why I'm mad at you and your wicker baskets an' sech goings-on. Who ever heard of people dying for any good cause. Young man, I don't like it. Why, I remember—"

Aunt Tildy paused, a brief memory of pain touching her heart. She remembered 25 years ago, and her father's voice back in that old fragment of time:

"Tildy," he'd said, "what are you going to do in life? The way you act, men don't have much with you. Nothing permanent, I mean. You kiss and run. You don't settle down and raise children."

"Papa," Tildy snapped right back at him. "I likes laughing and playing and singing, but I'm not the marrying kind. You know why?"

"Why?" asked Papa.

"I can't find a man who has my philosophy, Papa."

"What philosophy is that?"

"That death is silly. And it is. It took away Mama when we needed her most of all. Now, do you call that intelligent?"

PAPA looked at her and his eyes got wet and gray and bleak. He patted her shoulder. "You're always right, Tildy. But what can we do? Death comes to everybody?"

"Fight back," she cried. "Strike it below the belt. Fight it. Don't believe in it!"

"It can't be done," said Papa, sadly. "You're all alone in the world."

"There's got to be a beginning somewhere. I'm beginning my own philosophy here and now," Tildy declared. "Why, it's just silly that people live a couple years and then are dropped like a wet seed in a hole and nothing sprouts but a smell. What good do they do that way? They lay there a million years, doing no good for nobody. Most of 'em fine, nice and neat people, or at least trying."

So, after a few years, Papa died. Aunt Tildy remembered how she had tried to talk him out of it, but he passed on anyway. Then she ran away. She couldn't stay with him after he was dead. He was a denial of
her philosophy. She didn’t attend his burial. She didn’t do anything but set up this antique shop on the front of this old house and live alone for years, that is until Emily came.

Tildy didn’t want to take the girl in. Why? Because Emily believed in dying. But her mother was an old friend, and Tildy had promised.

"Emily," continued Aunt Tildy, to the man in black, "was the first person to live in this house with me in years. I never got married. I didn’t like the idea of living with a man for twenty-thirty year and then have him up and die on me. It would shake my philosophy down like a house of cards. I shied away from the world pretty much. I guess I got pretty persnickety at people if they ever so much as mentioned death to me."

The young man politely interrupted now, and took up Aunt Tildy’s story for her in even, calm and quiet tones:

"All through the last World War, as I recall, you never read a newspaper. You beat a man over the head with your umbrella and drove him from your shop, when he insisted on telling you about the battle of the Argonne.

"When radio came in, you stuck by your old phonograph. You played the nice old records. Harry Lauder singing Roamin' in the Gloamin’, and Madame Schumann-Heink with her lullabies. As the years passed, you tried to teach Emily, but her mind was made up about—certain things. She was nice enough to respect your way of thinking, and she never mentioned—morbid—things."

Aunt Tildy sniffed. "Think you’re smart, huh? How you know all those things?" She shrugged her shoulders. "Well, now, if you think you can come and talk me into that silly wicker basket, you’re way off the trestle. If you so much as lay a hand on me, I’ll spit right in your face!"

The young man smiled. Aunt Tildy sniffed again.

"Now, you don’t have to simper at me like a sick dog. I’m too old to be made love at. That’s all twisted dry, like an old tube of paint, and left behind in the years."

There was a noise. The clock in the hall struck three. Strange. It seemed to Aunt Tildy that it had just done that once before, a moment ago. She liked the old clock. Ivory and ebony with gold angels hanging naked around the face of it. Nice tone. Like cathedral chimes sounding softly.

“Are you just going to sit there, young man?”

“I am.”

“Then you won’t mind if I take a nap. Just a little cat nap. Now, don’t you get up off that chair. You set right there. You set there and don’t come creeping round me, toddying. Just gonna close my eyes for a wee bit. That’s right. That’s right. . . .”

Nice and cool and restful time of day. No noise. Silence. Just the clock a ticking away busy as termites in wood. Just the old room smelling of polished mahogany and leather in the morris chair, and books sitting stiff on the shelves, So nice.

You aren’t getting up from the chair, are you, Mister? Better not. I got one eye open for you. Yes, indeed I have. Yes, I have. Oh, Ab. Hrm.

So nice. So drowsy. So quiet. Oh, so nice.

Who’s that moving around in the dark with my eyes closed? Who’s that kissing my cheek? That you, Emily? No. No. Guess it was my imagination. Only—dreaming. Land, yes, that’s what it is. Drifting off, off, off. . . .

A? WHAT SAY? OH!

"Just a moment while I put on my glasses. There."

The clock, unpredictably, still said only a few minutes after three. Shame, old clock. Have to have it fixed.

The young man in dark clothing stood near the door. Aunt Tildy nodded her head.

"You leaving so soon, young man? Good thing. Emily’s coming home and she’d fix you. Had to give up, didn’t you? Couldn’t convince me, could you? I’m mule-stubborn. You couldn’t get me out of this house, no-sirree. Well, young man, you needn’t bother coming back to try again."

The young man bowed with slow dignity.

"I have no intention of coming again. Never."

"Fine," declared Aunt Tildy. "I always told Papa I’d win out. Why, I’m gonna sit here by this window and knit for the next
thousand years. They'll have to rip its boards down around me to get me out."

The dark young man was smiling funny.

"Why you smirking?" demanded Aunt Tildy. "You just get out, and quit looking like the cat that ate the canary. And you tote that old fool wicker basket with you."

The four men were already treading heavily out the front door. Aunt Tildy studied the way they handled the basket. It wasn't heavy, and yet they were staggering under its weight.

"Here, now!" Aunt Tildy arose in tremulous indignation. "Did you steal something from my antique shop? My books." She glanced about concernedly. "No. The clocks? No. What you got in that wicker?"

"Curious?" asked the young man, softly.


"Good-by."

"Good-by to you, too. Go away!"

The door closed. That was better. Gone. Darned fool men with their funny ideas. No never minds about the wicker. If they stole something, she didn't care, as long as they let her be.

"Here now," said Aunt Tildy, pleased. "Here comes Emily home from college. About time. Lovely girl, walking along. But, Lord, the girl looks pale and funny today. Walking so slow. I wonder why. Looks worried, she does. Poor girl. Tired, maybe. I'll just hustle her up a pot of coffee and a tray of cakes."

Emily came up the front steps. While Aunt Tildy was bustling around, she could hear the slow, deliberative steps. What ails the girl, thought Tildy. Didn't sound like she had no more spunk than a dead lizard. The door opened in front. Emily stood out in the hall. Why didn't she come in? Funny girl.

"Oh, Emily?" called Aunt Tildy.

Emily came walking in.

"Oh, there you are, Emily. I been waiting for you to come. There was the darndest fool men roaming about in here with a wicker basket, and a young man who tried talking me into something I didn't want. You just missed them. Glad you're home. Makes it right cozy—"

Aunt Tildy stopped talking. She realized that for a full minute Emily had been staring at her. Staring hard.

"Emily. What's wrong? Why you looking at me like that, Emily? Stop your staring? Here, now, I'll bring you a cup of coffee. There."

"Emily, why you backing away from me? "Emily, stop screaming, child. Stop screaming, Emily! Stop screaming! You keep screaming, like that, you go crazy. Emily, get up off the floor, get away from that wall, cringing, Emily! Emily, stop screaming, screaming, child! I won't hurt you.

"Land, if it ain't one thing it's another. "Emily, what's WRONG, child. . . ?"

EMILY groaned and put her hands up to her face.

"Emily, child, here now. Sip this water. Here now, child. That's it."

Emily opened her eyes, stared, and then shut them, quivering, and pulled back. "Oh, Aunt Tildy. Oh."

"Stop that!" Aunt Tildy slapped her.

"What ails you?"

Emily forced herself to look upon Tildy again.

She thrust out her young fingers and they vanished inside of Aunt Tildy.

"What fool notion thing are you messing with!" cried Tildy, surprised. "Take your hand away! Take it away, I say!"

Emily trembled again and turned away her head, shaking her golden hair into shining temblors. "You're not here, you're gone. Oh, you're gone. Oh, you're gone. I'm just dreaming."

"You're not dreaming. Hush, baby. Lands of Ghoshen!"

"You're dead. Oh, it's awful. You're dead. You CAN'T be here."

This sort of talk upset Tildy a great deal. She took Emily's hand and it passed clean through her lacy bosom. Instantly, Aunt Tildy raged to her feet, stomping them.

"Why—why—" she muttered angrily, "that—that fibber, that liar—that sneak-thief!" Her thin hands knotted into wiry hard pale fists. "That dark, dark fiend! He stole it, he stole it! He took it away, he did, oh, he did, he did! Why, I—" She could find no words to symbolize the steaming wrath within her. Her pale blue eyes were
fire. She spluttered off into an indignant silence. Then she turned to Emily. "Child, get up off that floor. I need your help. Get up, now!"

Emily lay there, shivering.

"All right," declared Aunt Tildy. "PART of me is here. By the Lord Harry, what's left of me will have to do; momentarily. Now stop gawking and fetch my cloak and bonnet!"

Emily confessed, "I'm—scared. I'm—so scared."

Aunt Tildy planted fists on bustled hips. "Is you seared of me?"

"Yes."

"Why? I'm no booger. I'm just me. You known me most of your life. Now's no time to snivel and sopp. You fetch up on your feet or I'll slap you straight across the bridge of your nose!"

Emily rose in sobbing haste. She stood like a cornered animal, trying to decide which direction to bolt in.

"Where's your car, Emily?"

"Out—in—front, Ma'am."

"Good." Aunt Tildy hustled her out the front door. "Now—" Her sharp stare poked both directions of the street. "Which way is it to the mortuary?"

Emily had to hold onto the rail of the steps fumbling down. "What are you going to do, Aunt Tildy?"

"Do?" cried Tildy, tottering after her, jowls shaking in a thin, pale fury. "Why, get my body back, of course! Get my body back! Go on!"

The car—roared—Emily—clenched to the steering-wheel, staring straight ahead at the curving rain-wetted streets. Aunt Tildy shook her parasol.

"Hurry, child, hurry. Hurry before they squirt juices into my body and dice and cubes in the way them persnickety morticians have a habit of doing. They cuts and sews it so it ain't no good to no one!"

"Oh, Auntie, Auntie, leave me go, don't make me drive. It won't do no good, no good at all," sighed the girl.

"Humph!" was all the old woman would say. "Humph!"

Emily pulled into the curb and cut the motor.

"Here," she said, wearily. "Here we are, Auntie." She collapsed over the wheel, but Aunt Tildy was already skedaddled from the open door and trotting with mincing skirt up the concrete drive and around in back to where the shining black hearse was unloading a wicker basket.

Aunt Tildy thrust to the attack, immediately.

"Young—man," she directed her shout at one of the four men unloading the basket, "young man, put down that basket. Put it right down!"

The four men carrying the basket paid little attention.

One of them said, "Step aside, lady. We're doing our job. Let us do it, please."

"But that's my body you got tucked in there!" declared Auntie, brandishing her parasol.

"That I wouldn't know anything about," said a third man. "Please don't block traffic, Madame. This thing is heavy."

That probed a painful wound in Aunt Tildy's pride.

"Sir," she cried. "I'll have you know I only weigh one hundred and ten pounds!" He looked at her with funny eyes. "I'm not interested in your hip measurements, lady. I just wanna go home and eat dinner. My wife'll kill me if I'm late."

The four of them forged ahead, Aunt Tildy in hot pursuit through a large door into a hall, down the hall and into a prepa-rations room.

A man in a clean white smock stood awaiting its arrival with a rather pleased smile on his long, eager-looking face. Aunt Tildy didn't care for the avidity of that face, or the personality of the entire man himself. The basket was deposited and the four men retreated.

The man in the white smock, evidently a mortician, glanced at Auntie and said: "Madame, this is no fit place for a gentle-woman."

"Well," said Auntie, gratified, "I'm glad you feel that way. Them is my sentiments, but I can't seem to convince those other men. That's exactly what I tried to tell that dark-clothed young man."

The mortician puzzled. "What dark-clothed young man is that?"

The one who came puddling around my house, that's who."
There was an old woman

"We have no one of that description working for us—"

"Well," Auntie continued, "as you just so intelligently said, this is no place for a gentle lady like me. And I don't want me here. I want me home, I want me cooking turkey for Sunday visitors, it's almost Easter time. I got people to worry about. Emily to feed, all them sweaters to finish knitting—"

The mortician was patient but beginning to get perturbed. "I'm sure you're quite philosophical and philanthropical, Madame, but I have no time. A body has just arrived."

This last, he said with evident relish, and a glance at his assorted scalpels and instruments.

Aunt Tildy bristled. "If you lays so much as a cuticle on that body, I'll beat you," she assured him. Again, the parasol.

He brushed her aside like a little old moth.

"Oh, Heimings," he called gently to one of the men. "Escort this little lady outside, please."

Aunt Tildy glared at the fellow. "Show me your backside, going the other way!"

The assistant came and held onto Aunt Tildy's wrists. "This way, please."

TILDY extricated herself easily. It wasn't hard with the way her flesh sort of—slipped. It even amazed Tildy. Such an unexpected talent to develop at this late stage. "There," said Auntie, much pleased at her ability. "See? You can't budge me. I want my lady back!"

The mortician opened the wicker basket casually, then in a recurrent series of double-takes realized that the body was—it seemed—maybe—yes—no—well, uh—it couldn't be but—"Ah," he exhaled suddenly. He turned. His eyes were wide.

"Madame," he said, cautiously. "Eh—this lady in here. Eh—is she—relative of yours?"

"A very dear relative. Be careful of her."

"A twin sister, perhaps." He grasped at a straw of dwindling logic, hopefully.

"No, you fool. Me, do you hear? Me!"

The mortician considered the proposition. He shook his head to clear the fog. "No," he decided. "Things like this don't happen." He busied himself about the room, make preparations. "Take her away, William. Get the other men and take her away. I can't work with a crank around."

When the four men assembled and converged upon her, Aunt Tildy was a fortress in lavandered lace. Arms crossed in muscular defiance she said, "I won't budge."

She continued to repeat that phrase as she was evicted in consecutive moves, like a pawn on a chessboard, from preparation room to resting room to hall, to waiting chamber, to funeral parlor, where she made her last-stand by sitting herself down on a chair in the very center of the funeral vestibule. There were pews going back into gray silence, and a smell of flowers.

"You can't sit there, lady," said one of the men. "That's where the body rests for the service tomorrow."

"I'm sitting right plumb here until I get what I want. Sit right here on this spot," was Auntie's instant retort.

THEY tried to move her. She just sat there, pale fingers fussing with her fussy lace at her throat, jaw set, one high shining shoe tapping impatiently. If they got near enough she quickly whopped them a whop with her parasol. And when they touched her she sort of—slipped—away.

Mr. Carrington, the Mortuary President, heard the disturbance from his office in back and came toddling in to see what the commotion was about. He scurried down the aisle. "Here, here," he whispered, finger to mouth, "Show more respect. What is this? Oh. Madame, may I help you?"

She looked him up and down. "You may."

"And how may I be of service, please?"

"Go in that room over there," directed Aunt Tildy.

"Yes?"

"And tell that eager young investigator to quit fiddling with my body. I'm a maiden lady, and my moles, birthmarks, scars and other bric-a-brac, including the turn of my ankle, are my own secrets. I don't want him prying around, cutting it or hurting it in any way."

This was a trifle vague to Mr. Carrington, who had not as yet had an opportunity to correlate bodies. "I don't—see," he said, in vague helplessness.
"He's got me in there on his table like a turkey ready to be drawn and stuffed—"

Mr. Carrington hustled off to verify this claim. After fifteen minutes of waiting silence and horrified arguing, comparing of notes with the mortician behind the closed door, Mr. Carrington returned, pale and shaking, to confront Auntie.

"Well?" said Auntie.

"Uh—that is. Most irregular. You can't—sit—there."

"Can't I?"

Carrington dropped his glasses, picked them up, fumbled them on his nose and said, "You are making it difficult for us."

"I? I!" raged Auntie. "Saint Vitus in the morning! Now, looky here, Mister Blood and Bones or whatever, you tell that—"

"But he's already extracting the blood from the body."

"What!" Auntie swayed and coughed. It was like a kick in the face with an iron boot. "What'd you say?"

"Yes, yes, oh, I assure you, yes. So you just go away, there's nothing to be done. The blood is running from the body and it'll soon be all filled with nice fresh A-1 formaldehyde." He laughed nervously. "Our mortician is also performing a brief autopsy to determine the cause of death."

Auntie was on her feet, burning. "Cutting me, is he?"

"Y-yes."

"He can't do that. Only coroners are allowed to do that."

"Well, we sometimes allow a little—"

"Young man!"

"Yes?"

"You are going to march plumb straight into that room now and you are going to tell that Cutemup to pump all that nice New England blue blood right back into that fine-skinned old body, and if he's taken anything out of that body, for him to attach it back in so it'll function proper, and then you'll turn that body, fresh as paint back into my keeping. You hear, you HEAR!"

"There's nothing I can do. Nothing."

"Awright then, snigger-britches. Tell you WHAT. I'm setting here on this spot for the next two hundred years. You hear? And every time anyone comes in I'll spit ectoplasm right square in their left nostril!"

Carrington fumbled that thought around in the weakening interior of his mind and emitted a squeak. "Oh, no. No. You'll dislocate our business. Heavens. Millions of dollars will be lost. You wouldn't do that?"

Auntie smiled pleasantly. "Wouldn't I?"

Carrington ran up the dark aisle and in the distance one could hear him frantically fingerling a dial-phone and then talking to a series of important people. It took him half an hour and then huge cars began roaring up in front of the mortuary and the brothers Harrington arrived to bolster their hysterical president.

All six of them came down the aisle like a delegation of diplomats. "What seems to be the trouble?"

Auntie told them with a few well-chosen cuss words.

They held a conference, meanwhile notifying the mortician to discontinue his home-work until such time as an amenable agreement had been reached. The mortician came out of his chamber and stood smiling quietly and smoking a cigar.

Auntie looked at the cigar. "Where did you put the ashes?" she cried, horrified.

The mortician only smiled imperturbably and puffed.

The committee finally decided. Harrington Number One represented the others. "Madame, we need this vestibule to carry on our business. We need it badly. Now, in all fairness, you wouldn't throw us out on the street to continue our services, would you?"

AUNTIE looked the vultures over. "Oh, I wouldn't mind. No, I wouldn't mind at all."

Harrington wiped sweat from his cheeks. "Our proposition is this. You can have your body back."

"Ha!" shouted Auntie. Then, with caution: "Intact?"

"Intact."

"Without formaldehyde?"

"Without formaldehyde!"

"With blood in it?"

"Blood. Yes; yes, oh, my God, yes, if only you'll take it and go."

Auntie nodded a prim head. "Fair enough. Fix it up, and it's a deal!"
Harrington glared at the mortician. "Well, don't stand there! Fix it up!"

"And be careful with that cigar butt," added Auntie.

"EASY, EASY," said Aunt Tildy. "Put the wicker basket down on the floor where I can step in it easy."

They placed the wicker on the floor. She didn't look at the body much. Her only comment was, "Natural looking." Then she let herself fall backward into the wicker.

There was a sudden biting sensation of arctic coldness, a great twisting nausea and a spinning. It was like two drops of matter coalescing. Water trying to seep into concrete. So slow to do. So hard. Like a butterfly trying to fight back into its discarded husk of chrysalis.

All the faces watched Aunt Tildy in her struggles. Mr. Harrington was evidently concerned. He kept wringing his fingers apprehensively and trying to help with gestures. The mortician was frankly skeptical and in grim humor. The others just stared.

Seeping into cold granite stone. Seeping into a frozen and ancient statue. Fighting all the way.

"Come alive, damn ye!" shouted Aunt Tildy to herself. "Raise up a bit."

The body half rose, fumbling inside the dry wicker.

"Get to your legs, woman!"

The body rose further, blindly groping. "See!" shouted Aunt Tildy.

Light entered the webbed blind eyes. "Feel!" urged Aunt Tildy.

The body felt the warmth of the room, the sudden presence of the preparations table against which to lean, panting.

"Move!"

The body took a creakingly unsteady step. "Hear!" she shouted.

All the noises of the place came into the dulled ears. Opening up to let them in. The harsh, expectant breathing of the mortician and the whimpering Mr. Harrington.

"Walk!" she cried.

The body walked.

"Think!" Auntie said.

The old brain thought.

"Now—speak!" she ordered.

The body spoke, bowing to the mortician's crew.

"Much obliged. Thank you."

"Now," said Aunt Tildy, finally. "Cry!"

And she began to cry tears of utter happiness.

AND now, any afternoon, about four, if you want to visit Aunt Tildy, you just walk around to her antique shop and rap on the door. There's a big black funeral wreath on the door. But don't mind that. Aunt Tildy left it there. She has some sense of humor.

You rap on the door. It's double-barred and triple-locked, and when you rap her voice shrills out at you:

"Is that the man in black?"

And you laugh and say no, no, it's only me, Aunt Tildy.

And she laughs and says, "Come in quick!" and she whips the door open and slams it shut back of you so no man in black can ever slip in behind you. Then she escorts you in and pours you your cup of coffee and shows you her latest knitted sweater for the boys overseas. She's not as fast as she used to be, and can't see as good, but she gets along.

"And, if you're especially good," Aunt Tildy declares, setting her coffee-cup to one side, "I'll give you a little treat."

"What's that?" visitors will ask.

"This," says Auntie, pleased with her little uniqueness, her little joke.

Then with modest moves of her fingers she will unfasten the white lace at her neck and chest and for a brief moment show what lies beneath:

The long blue scar where the autopsy was neatly sewn together.

"Not bad sewing for a man," she allows.

"Oh, some more coffee? There."

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The Man Who Wouldn't Hang

The official State executioner had one story to tell
he was not likely ever to forget.

By STANTON A. COBLENTZ

HE WAS a burly man with a beaked nose, and hard, cold, glittering eyes. For thirty years he had been the official State executioner; and, consequently, he had interesting if grisly stories to tell. There is one of his yarns that I am not likely soon to forget.

"Did anybody ever get away from you?" one of us put the inevitable question. And Carrigan flung himself far back in his chair, gave his mat of grizzled hair a violent toss, and stroked his bony projecting chin.

"Well, nobody ever broke out of the death-cell, if that's what you mean," he answered, slowly. "But one fellow did get away, just the same."

All of us leaned forward eagerly.

"Yes, sirree, one fellow got away, but you wouldn't believe me if I told you