

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (1875) – In the Graveyard [Chap. IX]

It was a graveyard of the old-fashioned Western kind. It was on a hill, about a mile and a half from the village. It had a crazy board fence around it, which leaned inward in places, and outward the rest of the time, but stood upright nowhere. Grass and weeds grew rank over the whole cemetery. All the old graves were sunken in, there was not a tombstone on the place; round-topped, worm-eaten boards staggered over the graves, leaning for support and finding none. 'Sacred to the memory of' So-and-So had been painted on them once, but it could no longer have been read, on the most of them, now, even if there had been light. A faint wind moaned through the trees, and Tom feared it might be the spirits of the dead, complaining at being disturbed. The boys talked little, and only under their breath, for the time and the place and the pervading solemnity and silence oppressed their spirits. They found the sharp new heap they were seeking, and ensconced themselves within the protection of three great elms that grew in a bunch within a few feet of the grave. Then they waited in silence for what seemed a long time. The hooting of a distant owl was all the sound that troubled the dead stillness. Tom's reflections grew oppressive. He must force some talk. So he said in a whisper:

'Hucky, do you believe the dead people like it for us to be here?' Huckleberry whispered:

'I wisht I knowed. It's awful solemn like, AIN'T it?'

'I bet it is.'

There was a considerable pause, while the boys canvassed this matter inwardly. Then Tom whispered: 'Say, Hucky—do you reckon Hoss Williams hears us talking?'

'O' course he does. Least his sperrit does.'

Tom, after a pause: 'I wish I'd said Mister Williams. But I never meant any harm. Everybody calls him Hoss.'

'A body can't be too partic'lar how they talk 'bout theseyer dead people, Tom.'

This was a damper, and conversation died again.

Presently Tom seized his comrade's arm and said: 'Sh!'

'What is it, Tom?' And the two clung together with beating hearts.'

'Sh! There 'tis again! Didn't you hear it?'

'I —'

'There! Now you hear it.'

'Lord, Tom, they're coming! They're coming, sure.'

What'll we do?'

'I dono. Think they'll see us?'

'Oh, Tom, they can see in the dark, same as cats. I wisht I hadn't come.'

'Oh, don't be afeard. I don't believe they'll bother us. We ain't doing any harm. If we keep perfectly still, maybe they won't notice us at all.'

'I'll try to, Tom, but, Lord, I'm all of a shiver.'

[...]

Some vague figures approached through the gloom, swinging an old-fashioned tin lantern that freckled the ground with innumerable little spangles of light. Presently Huckleberry whispered with a shudder: 'It's the devils sure enough. Three of 'em! Lordy, Tom, we're goners! Can you pray?'

'I'll try, but don't you be afeard. They ain't going to hurt us. 'Now I lay me down to sleep, I—'

'Sh!'

'What is it, Huck?'

'They're HUMANS! One of 'em is, anyway. One of 'em's old Muff Potter's voice.'

'No—'tain't so, is it?'

'I bet I know it. Don't you stir nor budge. He ain't sharp enough to notice us. Drunk, the same as usual, likely—blamed old rip!'

'All right, I'll keep still. Now they're stuck. Can't find it. Here they come again. Now they're hot. Cold again. Hot again. Red hot! They're p'inted right, this time. Say, Huck, I know another o' them voices; it's Injun Joe.'

'That's so—that murderin' half-breed! I'd druther they was devils a dern sight. What kin they be up to?' The whisper died wholly out, now, for the three men had reached the grave and stood within a few feet of the boys' hiding-place.'

'Here it is,' said the third voice; and the owner of it held the lantern up and revealed the face of young Doctor Robinson.

Potter and Injun Joe were carrying a handbarrow with a rope and a couple of shovels on it. They cast down their load and began to open the grave. The doctor put the lantern at the head of the grave and came and sat down with his back against one of the elm trees. He was so close the boys could have touched him.

'Hurry, men!' he said, in a low voice; 'the moon might come out at any moment.'

They growled a response and went on digging. For some time there was no noise but the grating sound of the spades discharging their freight of mould and gravel. It was very monotonous. Finally a spade struck upon the coffin with a dull woody accent, and within another minute or two the men had hoisted it out on the ground. They pried off the lid with their shovels, got out the body and dumped it rudely on the ground. The moon drifted from behind the clouds and exposed the pallid face. The barrow was got ready and the corpse placed on it, covered with a blanket, and bound to its place with the rope. Potter took out a large spring-knife and cut off the dangling end of the rope and then said: 'Now the cussed thing's ready, Sawbones, and you'll just out with another five, or here she stays.'

'That's the talk!' said Injun Joe.'

'Look here, what does this mean?' said the doctor. 'You required your pay in advance, and I've paid you.'

'Yes, and you done more than that,' said Injun Joe, approaching the doctor, who was now standing. 'Five years ago you drove me away from your father's kitchen one night, when I come to ask for something to eat, and you said I warn't there for any good; and when I swore I'd get even with you if it took a hundred years, your father had me jailed for a vagrant. Did you think I'd forget? The Injun blood ain't in me for nothing. And now I've GOT you, and you got to SETTLE, you know!'

He was threatening the doctor, with his fist in his face, by this time. The doctor struck out suddenly and stretched the ruffian on the ground. Potter dropped his knife, and exclaimed: 'Here, now, don't you hit my pard!' and the next moment he had grappled with the doctor and the two were struggling with might and main, trampling the grass and tearing the ground with their heels. Injun Joe sprang to his feet, his eyes flaming with passion, snatched up Potter's knife, and went creeping, catlike and stooping, round and round about the combatants, seeking an opportunity. All at once the doctor flung himself free, seized the heavy headboard of Williams' grave and felled Potter to the earth with it—and in the same instant the half-breed saw his chance and drove the knife to the hilt in the young man's breast. He reeled and fell partly upon Potter, flooding him with his blood, and in the same moment the clouds blotted out the dreadful spectacle and the two frightened boys went speeding away in the dark.

Presently, when the moon emerged again, Injun Joe was standing over the two forms, contemplating them. The doctor murmured inarticulately, gave a long gasp or two and was still. The half-breed muttered:

'THAT score is settled—damn you.'

Then he robbed the body. After which he put the fatal knife in Potter's open right hand, and sat down on the dismantled coffin. Three—four—five minutes passed, and then Potter began to stir and moan. His hand closed upon the knife; he raised it, glanced at it, and let it fall, with a shudder. Then he sat up, pushing the body from him, and gazed at it, and then around him, confusedly. His eyes met Joe's.

'Lord, how is this, Joe?' he said.'

'It's a dirty business,' said Joe, without moving.'

'What did you do it for?'

'I! I never done it!'

'Look here! That kind of talk won't wash.'

Potter trembled and grew white.

'I thought I'd got sober. I'd no business to drink to-night. But it's in my head yet—worse'n when we started here. I'm all in a muddle; can't recollect anything of it, hardly. Tell me, Joe—HONEST, now, old feller—did I do it? Joe, I never meant to—'pon my soul and honor, I never meant to, Joe. Tell me how it was, Joe. Oh, it's awful—and him so young and promising.'

'Why, you two was scuffling, and he fetched you one with the headboard and you fell flat; and then up you come, all reeling and staggering like, and snatched the knife and jammed it into him, just as he fetched you another awful clip—and here you've laid, as dead as a wedge til now.'

'Oh, I didn't know what I was a-doing. I wish I may die this minute if I did. It was all on account of the whiskey and the excitement, I reckon. I never used a weepen in my life before, Joe. I've fought, but never with weepens. They'll all say that. Joe, don't tell! Say you won't tell, Joe—that's a good feller. I always liked you, Joe, and stood up for you, too. Don't you remember? You WON'T tell, WILL you, Joe?' And the poor creature dropped on his knees before the stolid murderer, and clasped his appealing hands.'

'No, you've always been fair and square with me, Muff Potter, and I won't go back on you. There, now, that's as fair as a man can say.'

'Oh, Joe, you're an angel. I'll bless you for this the longest day I live.' And Potter began to cry.

[...]

Two or three minutes later the murdered man, the blanketed corpse, the lidless coffin, and the open grave were under no inspection but the moon's. The stillness was complete again, too. [End of chapter.]