

THE FUNERAL



Morton Silcline was in his office musing over floral arrangements for the Fenton obsequies when the chiming strains of "I am Crossing o'er the Bar to Join the Choir Invisible" announced an entrant into Clooney's Cut-Rate Catafalque.

Blinking meditation from his liver-colored eyes, Silcline knit his fingers to a placid clasp, then settled back against the sable leather of his chair, a smile of funereal welcome on his lips. Out in the stillness of the hallway, footsteps sounded on the muffling carpet, moving with a leisured pace and, just before the tall man entered, the desk clock buzzed a curt acknowledgment to 7:30.

Rising as if caught in the midst of a *tête-à-tête* with death's bright angel, Morton Silcline circled the glossy desk on whispering feet and extended one flaccid-fingered hand.

"Ah, good evening, sir," he dulceted, his smile a precise compendium of sympathy and welcome, his voice a calculated drip of obeisance.

The man's handshake was cool and bone-cracking but Silcline managed to repress reaction to a momentary flicker of agony in his cinnamon eyes.

"Won't you be seated?" he murmured, fluttering his bruised hand toward The Grieved One's chair.

"Thank you," said the man, his voice a baritoned politeness as he

seated himself, unbuttoning the front of his velvet-collared overcoat and placing his dark homburg on the glass top of the desk.

"My name is Morton Silkline," Silkline offered as he recircled to his chair, settling on the cushion like a diffident butterfly.

"Asper," said the man.

"May I say that I am proud to meet you, Mister Asper?" Silkline purred.

"Thank you," said the man.

"Well, now," Silkline said, getting down to the business of bereavement, "what can Clooney's do to ease your sorrow?"

The man crossed his dark-trousered legs. "I should like," he said, "to make arrangements for a funeral service."

Silkline nodded once with an I-am-here-to-succor smile.

"Of course," he said, "you've come to the right place, sir." His gaze elevated a few inches beyond the pale. "*When loved ones lie upon that lonely couch of everlasting sleep,*" he recited, "*let Clooney draw the coverlet.*"

His gaze returned and he smiled with a modest subservience. "Mrs. Clooney," he said, "made that up. We like to pass it along to those who come to us for comfort."

"Very nice," the man said. "Extremely poetic. But to details: I'd like to engage your largest parlor."

"I see," Silkline answered, restraining himself, only with effort, from the rubbing together of hands. "That would be our Eternal Rest Room."

The man nodded affably. "Fine. And I would also like to buy your most expensive casket."

Silkline could barely restrain a boyish grin. His cardiac muscle flexing vigorously, he forced back folds of sorrowful solicitude across his face.

"I'm sure," he said, "that can be effected."

"With gold trimmings?" the man said.

"Why . . . yes," said Director Silkline, clicking audibly as he swal-

lowed. "I'm certain that Clooney's can satisfy your every need in this time of grievous loss. Naturally—" His voice slipped a jot from the condoling to the fiduciary—"it will entail a bit more expenditure than might, otherwise, be—"

"The cost is of no importance," said the man, waving it away. "I want only the best of everything."

"It will be so, sir, it *will* be so," declared a fervent Morton Silkline.

"Capital," said the man.

"Now," Silkline went on, briskly, "will you be wishing our Mr. Mossbound to deliver his sermon *On Crossing The Great Divide* or have you a denominational ceremony in mind?"

"I think not," said the man, shaking his head, thoughtfully. "A friend of mine will speak at the services."

"Ah," said Silkline, nodding, "I see."

Reaching forward, he plucked the gold pen from its onyx holder, then with two fingers of his left hand, drew out an application form from the ivory box on his desk top. He looked up with the accredited expression for the Asking of Painful Questions.

"And," he said, "what is the name of the deceased, may I ask?"

"Asper," said the man.

Silkline glanced up, smiling politely. "A relative?" he inquired.

"Me," said the man.

Silkline's laugh was a faint coughing.

"I beg your pardon?" he said. "I thought you said—"

"Me," the man repeated.

"But, I don't—"

"You see," the man explained, "I never had a proper going off. It was catch-as-catch-can, you might say; all improvised. Nothing—how shall I put it?—*tasty*." The man shrugged his wide shoulders. "I always regretted that," he said. "I always intended to make up for it."

Morton Silkline had returned the pen to its holder with a decisive jabbing of the hand and was on his feet, pulsing with a harsh distemper.

"Indeed, sir," he commented. "Indeed."

The man looked surprised at the vexation of Morton Silklane.

"I—" he began.

"I am as fully prepared as the next fellow for a trifling badinage," Silklane interrupted, "but *not* during work hours. I think you fail to realize, sir, just where you are. This is Clooney's, a much respected *o*nsuary; not a place for trivial joking or—"

He shrank back and stared, open-mouthed, at the black-garbed man who was suddenly on his feet, eyes glittering with a light most unseemly.

"This," the man said, balefully, "is not a joke."

"Is not—" Silklane could manage no more.

"I came here," said the man, "with a most serious purpose in mind." His eyes glowed now like cherry-bright coals. "And I expect this purpose to be gratified," he said. "Do you understand?"

"I—"

"On Tuesday next," the man continued, "at 8:30 p.m., my friends and I will arrive here for the service. You will have everything prepared by then. Full payments will be made directly following the exequies. Are there any questions?"

"I—"

"I need hardly remind you," said the man, picking up his homburg, "that this affair is of the utmost importance to me." He paused patiently before allowing his voice to sink to a forbidding basso profundo. "I expect all to go well."

Bowing a modicum from the waist, the man turned and moved in two regal strides across the office, pausing a moment at the door.

"Uh . . . one additional item," he said. "That mirror in the foyer . . . *remove it*. And, I might add, any others that my friends and I might chance upon during our stay in your parlors."

The man raised one gray-gloved hand. "And now good night."

When Morton Silklane reached the hall, his customer was just

flapping out a small window. Quite suddenly, Morton Silklane found the floor.



They arrived at 8:30, conversing as they entered the foyer of Clooney's to be met by a tremble-legged Morton Silklane about whose eyes hung the raccoon circles of sleepless nights.

"Good evening," greeted the tall man, noting, with a pleased nod, the absence of the wall mirror.

"Good—" was the total of Silklane's wordage.

His vocal cords went slack and his eyes, embossed with daze, moved from figure to figure in the tall man's coterie—the gnarled hunchback whom Silklane heard addressed as Ygor; the peak-hatted crone upon whose ceremented shoulder a black cat crouched; the hulking hairy-handed man who clicked yellow teeth together and regarded Silklane with markedly more than casual eyes; the waxen-featured little man who licked his lips and smiled at Silklane as though he possessed some inner satisfaction; the half-dozen men and women in evening dress, all cherry-eyed and -lipped and—Silklane cringed—superbly toothed.

Silklane hung against the wall, mouth a circular entrance way, hands twitching feebly at his sides as the chatting assemblage passed him by, headed for the Eternal Rest Room.

"Join us," the tall man said.

Silklane stirred fitfully from the wall and stumble-wove an erratic path down the hallway, eyes still saucer-round with stupor.

"I trust," the man said pleasantly, "everything is well prepared."

"Oh," Silklane squeaked. "Oh—oh, yes."

"Sterling," said the man.

When the two of them entered the room, the others were grouped in an admiring semicircle about the casket.

"Is good," the hunchback was muttering to himself. "Is good box."

"Aye, be that a casket or be that a casket, Delphinia?" cackled the ancient crone and Delphinia replied, "Mrrrrrow."

While the others nodded, smiling felicitous smiles and murmuring, "Ah. Ah."

Then one of the evening-dressed women said, "Let Ludwig see," and the semicircle split open so the tall man could pass.

He ran his long fingers over the gold work on the sides and top of the casket, nodding appreciatively. "Splendid," he murmured, voice husky with emotion. "Quite splendid. Just what I always wanted."

"You picked a beauty, lad," said a tall white-haired gentleman.

"Well, try it on fer size!" the chuckling crone declared.

Smiling boyishly, Ludwig climbed into the casket and wriggled into place. "A perfect fit," he said, contentedly.

"Master look good," mumbled Ygor, nodding crookedly. "Look good in box."

Then the hairy-handed man demanded they begin because he had an appointment at 9:15, and everyone hurried to their chairs.

"Come, duck," said the crone, waving a scrawny hand at the ossified Silklane. "Sit by my side. I likes the pretty boys, I do, eh, Delphinia?" Delphinia said, "Mrrrrrow."

"Please, Jenny," Ludwig Asper asked her, opening his eyes a moment. "I'm serious. You know what this means to me."

The crone shrugged. "Aye. Aye," she muttered, then pulled off her peaky hat and fluffed at dank curls as the zombie-stiff Silklane quivered into place beside her, aided by the guiding hand of the little waxen-faced man.

"Hello, pretty boy," the crone whispered, leaning over and jabbing a spear-point elbow into Silklane's ribs.

Then the tall white-haired gentleman from the Carpathian zone rose and the service began.

"Good friends," said the gentleman, "we have gathered ourselves within these bud-wreathed walls to pay homage to our comrade, Ludwig Asper, from the pious and unyielding fates have chosen to

pluck from existence and place within that bleak sarcophagus of all eternity."

"*Ci-git*," someone murmured; "*Chant du cygne*," another. Ygor wept and the waxen-featured little man, sitting on the other side of Morton Silklane, leaned over to murmur, "*Tasty*," but Silklane wasn't sure it was in reference to the funeral address.

"And thus," the gentleman from Carpathia went on, "we collect our bitter selves about this, our comrade's bier; about this litter of sorrow, this cairn, this cromlech, this unhappy tumulus—"

"*Clearer, clearer*," demanded Jenny, stamping one pointy-toed and petulant shoe. "Mrrrrrow," said Delphinia and the crone winked one blood-laced eye at Silklane who shrank away only to brush against the little man who gazed at him with berry eyes and murmured once again, "*Tasty*."

The white-haired gentleman paused long enough to gaze down his royal nose at the crone. Then he continued, "—this mastaba, this sorrowing tope, this ghat, this dread dokhma—"

"What did he say?" asked Ygor, pausing in mid-sob. "What, what?"

"This ain't no declamation tourney, lad," the crone declared. "Keep it crisp, I say."

Ludwig raised his head again, a look of pained embarrassment on his face. "Jenny," he said. "*Please*."

"Aaaah . . . *toad's teeth!*" snapped the crone jadedly, and Delphinia moaned.

"*Requiescas in pace*, dear brother," the Count went on, testily. "The memory of you shall not perish with your untimely sepulture. You are, dear friend, not so much out of the game as playing on another field."

At which the hairy-handed man rose and hulked from the room with the guttural announcement, "*Go*," and Silklane felt himself rendered an icicle as he heard a sudden padding of clawed feet on the hallway rug and a baying which echoed back along the walls.

"Ullgate says he has a dinner appointment," the little man asided with a bright-eyed smile. Silkline's chair creaked with shuddering.

The white-haired gentleman stood tall and silent, his red eyes shut, his mouth tight-lipped with aristocratic pique.

"Count," pleaded Ludwig. "Please."

"Am I to endure these vulgar calumnies?" asked the Count. "These—"

"Well, *la-de-da*," crooned Jenny to her cat.

"Silence, woman!" roared the Count, his head disappearing momentarily in a white, trailing vapor, then reappearing as he gained control.

Ludwig sat up, face a twist of aggravation. "Jenny," he declared, "I think you'd better leave."

"You think to throw old Jenny of Boston out?" the crone challenged. "Well, you got a think that's coming then!"

And, as a shriveling Silkline watched, the crone slapped on her pointed hat and sprouted minor lightning at the fingertips. A snail-backed Delphinia bristled ebony hairs as the Count stepped forward, hand outstretched, to clasp onto the crone's shoulder, then stiffened in mid-stride as sizzling fire ringed him.

"Haa!" crowed Jenny while a horror-stricken Silkline gagged, "My rug!"

"Jen-ny!" Ludwig cried, clambering out. The crone gestured and all the flowers in the room began exploding like popcorn.

"*No-o*," moaned Silkline as the curtains flared and split. Chairs were overthrown. The Count bicarbonated to a hissing stream of white which flew at Jenny—who flung up her arms and vanished, cut and all, in an orange spume as the air grew thick with squeaks and rib-winged flapping.

Just before the bulbous-eyed Morton Silkline toppled forward, the waxen-faced man leaned over, smiling toothfully, squeezed the Director's numbed arm and murmured, "*Tasty*."

Then Silkline was at one with the rug.



Morton Silkline slumped in his sable-leathered chair, still twitching slightly even though a week had passed since the nerve-splitting event. On his desk lay the note that Ludwig Asper had left pinned to his unconscious chest.

Sir, it read. Accept, in addition to this bag of gold (which I trust will cover all costs) my regrets that full decorum was not effected by the guests at my funeral. For, save for that, the entire preparation was most satisfactory to me.

Silkline put down the note and grazed a loving touch across the hill of glinting coins on his desk. Through judicious inquiry, he had gleaned the information that a connection in Mexico (namely, a cosmetics nephew in Carrillo's Cut-Rate Catacomb) could safely dispose of the gold at mutual profit. All things considered, the affair had not been really as bad as all—

Morton Silkline looked up as something entered his office.

He would have chosen to leap back screaming and vanish in the flowered pattern of the wallpaper but he was too petrified. Once more gape-mouthed he stared at the huge, tentacled, ocher-dripping shapelessness that weaved and swayed before him.

"A friend," it said politely, "recommended you to me."

Silkline sat bug-eyed for a lengthy moment but then his twitching hand accidentally touched the gold again. And he found strength.

"You've come," he said, breathing through his mouth, "to the right place—uh . . . *sir*. Pumps—" He swallowed mightily and braced himself—"for all circumstances."

He reached for his pen, blowing away the yellow-green smoke which was beginning to obscure the office.

"Name of the deceased?" he asked, businesslike.