

# And All the Earth a Grave

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It all began when the new bookkeeping machine of a large Midwestern coffin manufacturer slipped a cog, or blew a transistor, or something. It was fantastic that the error—one of two decimal places—should enjoy a straight run of okays, human and mechanical, clear down the line; but when the figures clacked out at the last clacking-out station, there it was. The figures were now sacred; immutable; and it is doubtful whether the President of the concern or the Chairman of the Board would have dared question them—even if either of those two gentlemen had been in town.

As for the Advertising Manager, the last thing he wanted to do was question them. He carried them (they were the budget for the coming fiscal year) into his office, staggering a little on the way, and dropped dazedly into his chair. They showed the budget for his own department as exactly one hundred times what he'd been expecting. That is to say, fifty times what he'd put in for.

When the initial shock began to wear off, his face assumed an expression of intense thought. In about five minutes he leaped from his chair, dashed out of the office with a shouted syllable or two for his secretary, and got his car out of the parking lot. At home, he tossed clothes into a travelling bag and barged toward the door, giving his wife a quick kiss and an equally quick explanation. He didn't bother to call the airport. He meant to be on the next plane east, and no nonsense about it....

With one thing and another, the economy hadn't been exactly in overdrive that year, and predictions for the Christmas season were gloomy. Early retail figures bore them out. Gift buying dribbled along feebly until Thanksgiving, despite brave speeches by the Administration. The holiday passed more in self-pity than in thankfulness among owners of gift-oriented businesses.

Then, on Friday following Thanksgiving, the coffin ads struck.

Struck may be too mild a word. People on the streets saw feverishly-working crews (at holiday rates!) slapping up posters on billboards. The first poster was a dilly. A toothy and toothsome young woman leaned over a coffin she'd been unwrapping. She smiled as if she'd just received overtures of matrimony from an eighty-year-old billionaire. There was a Christmas tree in the background, and the coffin was appropriately wrapped. So was she. She looked as if she had just gotten out of bed, or were ready to get into it. For amorous young men, and some not so young,

the message was plain. The motto, "*The Gift That Will Last More Than a Lifetime*", seemed hardly to the point.

Those at home were assailed on TV with a variety of bright and clever skits of the same import. Some of them hinted that, if the young lady's gratitude were really precipitous, and the bedroom too far away, the coffin might be comfy.

Of course the more settled elements of the population were not neglected. For the older married man, there was a blow directly between the eyes: "*Do You Want Your Widow to Be Half-Safe?*" And, for the spinster without immediate hopes, "*I Dreamt I Was Caught Dead Without My Virginform Casket!*"

Newspapers, magazines and every other medium added to the assault, never letting it cool. It was the most horrendous campaign, for sheer concentration, that had ever battered at the public mind. The public reeled, blinked, shook its head to clear it, gawked, and rushed out to buy.

Christmas was not going to be a failure after all. Department store managers who had, grudgingly and under strong sales pressure, made space for a single coffin somewhere at the rear of the store, now rushed to the telephones like touts with a direct pronouncement from a horse. Everyone who possibly could got into the act. Grocery supermarkets put in casket departments. The Association of Pharmaceutical Retailers, who felt they had some claim to priority, tried to get court injunctions to keep caskets out of service stations, but were unsuccessful because the judges were all out buying caskets. Beauty parlors showed real ingenuity in merchandising. Roads and streets clogged with delivery trucks, rented trailers, and whatever else could haul a coffin. The Stock Market went completely mad. Strikes were declared and settled within hours. Congress was called into session early. The President got authority to ration lumber and other materials suddenly in starvation-short supply. State laws were passed against cremation, under heavy lobby pressure. A new racket, called boxjacking, blossomed overnight.

The Advertising Manager who had put the thing over had been fighting with all the formidable weapons of his breed to make his plant managers build up a stockpile. They had, but it went like a toupee in a wind tunnel. Competitive coffin manufacturers were caught napping, but by Wednesday after Thanksgiving they, along with the original one, were on a twenty-four hour, seven-day basis. Still only a fraction of the demand could be met. Jet passenger planes were stripped of their seats, supplied with Yankee gold, and sent to plunder the world of its coffins.

It might be supposed that Christmas goods other than caskets would take a bad dumping. That was not so. Such was the upsurge of prosperity, and such was the shortage of coffins, that nearly everything—with a few exceptions—enjoyed the biggest season on record.

On Christmas Eve the frenzy slumped to a crawl, though on Christmas morning there were still optimists out prowling the empty stores. The nation sat down to breathe. Mostly it sat on coffins, because there wasn't space in the living rooms for any other furniture.

There was hardly an individual in the United States who didn't have, in case of sudden sharp pains in the chest, several boxes to choose from. As for the rest of the world, it had better not die just now or it would be literally a case of dust to dust.

Of course everyone expected a doozy of a slump after Christmas. But our Advertising Manager, who by now was of course Sales Manager and First Vice President also, wasn't settling for any boom-and-bust. He'd been a frustrated victim of his choice of industries for so many years that now, with his teeth in something, he was going to give it the old bite. He gave people a short breathing spell to arrange their coffin payments and move the presents out of the front rooms. Then, late in January, his new campaign came down like a hundred-megatonner.

Within a week, everyone saw quite clearly that his Christmas models were now obsolete. The coffin became the new status symbol.

The auto industry was of course demolished. Even people who had enough money to buy a new car weren't going to trade in the old one and let the new one stand out in the rain. The garages were full of coffins. Petroleum went along with Autos. (Though there were those who whispered knowingly that the same people merely moved over into the new industry. It was noticeable that the center of it became Detroit.) A few trucks and buses were still being built, but that was all.

Some of the new caskets were true works of art. Others—well, there was variety. Compact models appeared, in which the occupant's feet were to be doubled up alongside his ears. One manufacturer pushed a circular model, claiming that by all the laws of nature the foetal position was the only right one. At the other extreme were virtual houses, ornate and lavishly equipped. Possibly the largest of all was the "*Togetherness*" model, triangular, with graduated recesses for Father, Mother, eight children (plus two playmates), and, in the far corner beyond the baby, the cat.

The slump was over. Still, economists swore that the new boom couldn't last either. They reckoned without the Advertising Manager, whose eyes gleamed brighter all the time. People already had coffins, which they polished and kept on display, sometimes in the new "Coffin-ports" being added to houses. The Advertising Manager's reasoning was direct and to the point. He must get people to use the coffins; and now he had all the money to work

with that he could use.

The new note was woven in so gradually that it is not easy to put a finger on any one ad and say, "It began here." One of the first was surely the widely-printed one showing a tattooed, smiling young man with his chin thrust out manfully, lying in a coffin. He was rugged-looking and likable (not too rugged for the spindly-limbed to identify with) and he oozed, even though obviously dead, virility at every pore. He was probably the finest-looking corpse since Richard the Lion-Hearted.

Neither must one overlook the singing commercials. Possibly the catchiest of these, a really cute little thing, was achieved by jazzing up the Funeral March.

It started gradually, and it was all so un-violent that few saw it as suicide. Teen-agers began having "Popping-off parties". Some of their elders protested a little, but adults were taking it up too. The tired, the unappreciated, the ill and the heavy-laden lay down in growing numbers and expired. A black market in poisons operated for a little while, but soon pinched out. Such was the pressure of persuasion that few needed artificial aids. The boxes *were* very comfortable. People just closed their eyes and exited smiling.

The Beatniks, who had their own models of coffin—mouldy, scroungy, and without lids, since the Beatniks insisted on being seen—placed their boxes on the Grant Avenue in San Francisco. They died with highly intellectual expressions, and eventually were washed by the gentle rain.

Of course there were voices shouting calamity. When aren't there? But in the long run, and not a very long one at that, they availed naught.

It isn't hard to imagine the reactions of the rest of the world. So let us imagine a few.

The Communist Block immediately gave its Stamp of Disapproval, denouncing the movement as a filthy Capitalist Imperialist Pig plot. Red China, which had been squabbling with Russia for some time about a matter of method, screamed for immediate war. Russia exposed this as patent stupidity, saying that if the Capitalists wanted to die, warring upon them would only help them. China surreptitiously tried out the thing as an answer to excess population, and found it good. It also appealed to the well-known melancholy facet of Russian nature. Besides, after pondering for several days, the Red Bloc decided it could not afford to fall behind in anything, so it started its own program, explaining with much logic how it differed.

An elderly British philosopher endorsed the movement, on the grounds that a temporary

setback in Evolution was preferable to facing up to anything.

The Free Bloc, the Red Bloc, the Neutral Bloc and such scraps as had been too obtuse to find themselves a Bloc were drawn into the whirlpool in an amazingly short time, if in a variety of ways. In less than two years the world was rid of most of what had been bedeviling it.

Oddly enough, the country where the movement began was the last to succumb completely. Or perhaps it is not so odd. Coffin-maker to the world, the American casket industry had by now almost completely automated box-making and gravedigging, with some interesting assembly lines and packaging arrangements; there still remained the jobs of management and distribution. The President of General Mortuary, an ebullient fellow affectionately called Sarcophagus Sam, put it well. "As long as I have a single prospective customer, and a single Stockholder," he said, mangling a stogie and beetling his brows at the one reporter who'd showed up for the press conference, "I'll try to put him in a coffin so I can pay him a dividend."

Finally, though, a man who thought he must be the last living human, wandered contentedly about the city of Denver looking for the coffin he liked best. He settled at last upon a rich mahogany number with platinum trimmings, an Automatic Self-Adjusting Cadaver-contour Innerspring Wearever-Plastic-Covered Mattress with a built in bar. He climbed in, drew himself a generous slug of fine Scotch, giggled as the mattress prodded him exploringly, closed his eyes and sighed in solid comfort. Soft music played as the lid closed itself.

From a building nearby a turkey-buzzard swooped down, cawing in raucous anger because it had let its attention wander for a moment. It was too late. It clawed screaming at the solid cover, hissed in frustration and finally gave up. It flapped into the air again, still grumbling. It was tired of living on dead small rodents and coyotes. It thought it would take a swing over to Los Angeles, where the pickings were pretty good.

As it moved westward over parched hills, it espied two black dots a few miles to its left. It circled over for a closer look, then grunted and went on its way. It had seen *them* before. The old prospector and his burro had been in the mountains for so long the buzzard had concluded they didn't know *how* to die.

The prospector, whose name was Adams, trudged behind his burro toward the buildings that shimmered in the heat, humming to himself now and then or addressing some remark to the beast. When he reached the outskirts of Denver he realized something was amiss. He stood and gazed at the quiet scene. Nothing moved except some skinny packrats and a few sparrows foraging for grain among the unburied coffins.

“Tarnation!” he said to the burro. “Martians?”

A half-buried piece of newspaper fluttered in the breeze. He walked forward slowly and picked it up. It told him enough so that he understood.

“They’re gone, Evie,” he said to the burro, “all gone.” He put his arm affectionately around her neck. “I reckon it’s up to me and you agin. We got to start all over.” He stood back and gazed at her with mild reproach. “I shore hope they don’t favor your side of the house so much this time.”

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