

The Grave Digger

By Marilyn Reeves

Old Joe Blankenship was known around town as the town drunk. Few knew that at one time he had achieved a bit of notoriety as a singer. Joe was a big man with a big voice, and used to travel from place to place as an entertainer. But, like so many whose lives consisted of one-night stands and lonely motel rooms, Joe befriended the bottle. Over time, his singing career dwindled to nothing, and now he found himself homeless, pushing an old grocery cart with a squeaky wheel around town, picking up treasures, one of which was an old leather World War I soldier's helmet that he wore over a black wool scarf to keep his head warm.

From time to time, he found work as a grave digger at the Peaceful Haven Cemetery, and often spent his nights there. He stashed his cart containing his bedroll, a few tidbits of food and, of course, his bottle of booze, in a dense stand of bushes, not far from the entrance. When it got dark he would wrap himself in a comfortable cocoon inside the shelter of the portico of the mausoleum and drink himself to sleep.

One Halloween night his sleep was disturbed by the sound of someone crying, "Help! Help!" Old Joe opened a bleary eye to see a boy of about ten running hell bent for leather, holding a cloth bag filled to the brim with candy, and glancing behind him at a group of a half dozen bigger boys in hot pursuit.

"Here, kid, come here! I'll hide you." The boy turned and saw the old tramp beckoning to him. He hesitated for a moment, a bit afraid of the disheveled old man, but decided to take a chance. He was more afraid of the boys trying to catch him.

Once the boy was secluded, Old Joe stood up and staggered over towards the oncoming group, then began to moan loudly in his deep baritone voice, "Whoooooooooooo goes there? Who dares to awaken me from my slumberrrrrrr? Come closer, so that I may seeeeeeee you. I eat tender young boys for breakfast! Ooooooooooh, hah, hah, hah, hah, hah!"

Now it was the pursuers who became the pursued! Hair standing on end, they ran lickety-split, looking back over their shoulders at the hulking figure, shrouded in a blanket and wearing a strange looking helmet, who came clomping after them. And one by one they fell into a freshly dug grave, which was only about four feet deep, as Old Joe hadn't finished the job yet. They tumbled one on top of the other into a heap of flailing arms and legs. "Oww! Ouch!" they cried, as ankles were turned, knees were bruised, and heads were knocked together. "Be quiet!" they whispered to one another, "or he'll find us!" The boys huddled together, shaking and shivering, afraid to move out of those cramped quarters for the rest of the night.

In the meantime, Tom (the boy with the big bag of candy) sat in the shadows of the mausoleum, sharing his stash with Old Joe, and listening to his tales of better days. But when the old drunk finally fell asleep, Tom sneaked back out of the cemetery and ran home to the light of the moon, grateful to the old grave digger for saving him, along with his big bag of candy.