

POST-MORTEM ROMANCE

NORMAN LAMM

"The dear deceased, whom we mourn with such grief today, was known not only for his great benevolence to the unfortunate," the young Rabbi cleared his throat loudly, while raising his right hand for effect, "but also for his high degree of sportsmanship."

The mourning audience was visibly affected, something the young Rabbi noticed with a deep feeling of satisfaction, and amid the loud assents which the mourners poured forth from their bereaved systems, he heard one mourner moaning illustrations of the deceased's sportsmanship with a reference to the time the deceased returned to his brother-in-law the twenty-odd dollars he had legitimately won from him in a game of pinochle.

The Young Rabbi glanced at the draped coffin in front of him keeping his stare frozen at the sad enclosure before him long enough to force a lone tear out of each eye. Yes, he was in good form today. His new black homburg matched perfectly with his jet-black eyebrows and moustache. The moustache was a new addition to his smooth physiognomy, and it was the one thing he adored more than his homburg which he wore every Sunday to the funerals. This moustache, the Young Rabbi observed cheerfully, was not the common geometric kind which bore a remarkable resemblance to a pair of 30-60-90 right triangles drawn side to side. It was, rather, a sort of pencil-line affair which closely followed the contour of his upper lip. The Young Rabbi preferred this type of moustache, since it would emphasize and exaggerate every facial expression in which the upper lip played an important role. Every few minutes he would pass his right hand over this sacred spot between his nose and upper lip to reassure himself that he was presentable to his audience. It was a difficult thing to speak to funeral audiences these days, and he had to supply what his "flock" demanded. Anything but the black homburg, dark gray suit and rimless eyeglasses was unthinkable. "Yes", he humorously told himself, "the Modern Rabbinate is the first to be affected by That New Look." Every piece of clothing, from his black homburg to the small white kerchief anxiously and shyly peeking from his left breast-pocket, every twitch of his face, had, of necessity, become part and parcel of his Funeral Trade. Yet he felt angry at a fanatical old Jew back in the Temple who had accused him of unfair competition with the undertakers. These guys just don't understand.

The lone pair of tears had reached the middle of his cheeks and were plainly visible to the mourners. The time was now ripe for his punch-line. Love, Nature and Death, he had been told in his undergraduate days were a terrific combination in poetry. Why shouldn't the same hold true for funeral orations?

"And when our dear deceased is laid to his eternal rest, he does not really die. While he may die physically, the Prophets tell us that one who is loved by others dies only in body and not in spirit, for Nature fosters his spirit in the souls of those he loved. And we all loved Nathan dearly. You, I, the beggar on the street corner, all of us loved him dearly." For a moment the Young Rabbi wondered what might happen if someone asked him where the Prophets stated such ideas. But these modern mourners never worried about such trivialities. If the Rabbi says that the Prophets say so, then the Prophets say so.

"No, dear friends and relatives of the deceased, Nathan did **not** die in spirit! He lives with us and shall live with us forever and say ye all AMEN."

That did it! The combination of the sentimental elements and the Young Rabbi's saintly face, which closely resembled the face in the paintings of the Crucifixion, evoked a homogeneous outburst of wailing from the relatives of Nate Cowan, formerly Cohen, who had been a notorious gambler in his younger days, and had finally settled down, in his later years, to playing the Stock Market. For a moment the Young Rabbi wondered who Nate Cowan really was, and why he had suddenly fallen in love with him at his funeral. It was a funny feeling he had, developing a romance with a cadaver. Gosh! he thought, what a time for romance!

The Young Rabbi stepped off the platform reverently. He followed the coffin, which was being carried by husky pallbearers, and recited a psalm in English, nodding his head in a very ecclesiastical manner. The crying and wailing of the mourners soon drowned out the monotone of the Young Rabbi.

Outside, the Young Rabbi fingered awhile the check that Nate Cowan's oldest son gave him, and then finally put it in his wallet. The fresh air was more congruous with his black homburg, moustache and rimless eyeglasses than the stuffy air in the chapel. One glance at his wrist watch convinced him that he must hurry. Sunday is a busy day, he thought, as he opened the door of his Plymouth.

The Young Rabbi leaned back in his seat for comfort, and stepped on the accelerator. The trumped-up romance story bothered him, but he dismissed it with a shrug. Even if he didn't exactly remember when, where and if the Prophets spoke about it, still . . .

Only a few minutes he thought, to the nearby cemetery for the Goldson unveiling . . .

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