The Legend of Laughing Jack

JACK KILGORE

Long before the starched, clean stiffness was gone from their striped denim work aprons, the greenest boys at Herr Grosskopf's wholesale house were familiar with the Legend of Laughing Jack. They heard it from the wrinkled and gnomelike Isenhorst; they heard it from the wrinkled and deaf Shmidt; they heard it from Schneider, Fischer, and Schultz; but the most terrifying accounts were those given by Sam, the colored janitor. Only Jones of the shipping department never talked of it, but then Jones was different.

Throughout the first long months spent emptying the enormous wastebaskets and sweeping the endless aisles, the new boys became as familiar with the tragedy as if they themselves had seen it. Vividly the incident was recreated by the gutteral accents of Isenhorst, by the shouts of Schmidt, and by the awesome whispers of Sam. Soon the boys themselves would hear the shadows echoing, "Take me down, down, down . . . .", until the basement would come to hold such strange terrors and stranger fascinations that the boys would anticipate with eagerness and fear the day when they would be promoted to basement stockboy.

I received my first hint of the Legend from Schmidt. He was explaining to me how to dust his stock. "And these are the funeral wreaths. Understand?"

I nodded, knowing it was useless to speak.

"Dust them everyday. Understand? And cover them at night." He indicated the large folded strips of cloth beneath the counter. "Understand?" I nodded. "Handle them carefully; they are fragile. And this is the florist's grass." (Whenever it was spoken of in reference to Laughing Jack, I later learned, it was called Graveyard Grass — otherwise florist's grass or plain imitation grass.) "Shake it occasionally, out in the back room. But not too hard. Understand? And don't try to sleep on it," he laughed soundlessly, "as Laughing Jack did. The same thing might happen to you. Understand?" I didn't, but I nodded, and he left me.


I asked him about the funeral gress. "You mean the Grafeyard Grass. Ya, ya. He slept on it. Pack in that liddle room under the sidewalk. A deep pile of Grafeyard Grass. Ven he should haff vorked he lay there. Andt slept — or sang."

"That vaste-pasket, empty id." Thus he dismissed me, and the next day as I ate my lunch on a swivel chair in the back of the packing room, I pressed Sam for the details.

"Why, he sang the Werceburger Song, yeah, the Werceburger Song. 'Take me down, down, down where the Werceburger flows, flows, flows; It goes down, down, down, but nobody knows where it goes.'"

Perhaps it was the awed look in Sam's eyes, perhaps it was the awesome whisper to which his voice had sunk, but from the dark of the excelsior bins came the echo, "Take me down, down, down where the Werceburger flows, flows, flows . . . ."

"And you can hear him to this day, down in the basement, under the sidewalk, singin' 'Take me down, down, down'."

And again came the echo from the excelsior bins, "Take me down . . . ." and
to blot it out of my chilled hearing I asked Sam what had happened.

“What happened? Why he died; that’s what happened. Or rather he was killed. Yes sir. Killed. Old Mister Grosskopf come down one day to check up on him. He found Laughin’ Jack lyin’ there, one heel swingin’ in time, and singin’ that Werceburger Song. Well sir, old Mister Grosskopf took one look, glared like a thunder-cloud, and let out a roar I heard up here in the packin’ room. And Laughin’ Jack just up and died.”

The next day I saw Herr Grosskopf and believed the story. He was short and had a body like a barrel. He was tremendously fat, huge of girth, and his jowls were large and pendulous. Even his cheeks sagged into flabby pouches. Instead of wrinkles on his forehead, his flesh fell in little flaps of fat. His little pig-eyes were fierce and glaring, almost obscured by folds of flesh. The fact that they were browless and lashless only made his moustaches the more terrifying. They were large handlebar moustaches, more Turkish than German, and were quivering with anger when I saw him. Some minor detail had enraged him, and he was terrible to see. I slunk unobtrusively away.

Thereafter my days were haunted. Each morning as I stepped to the front door my feet echoed hollowly over the opaque glass grating of the sidewalk. In the ring of my steps lay the essence of my terror, and the sound filled my days with a painful sensitivity. The long aisles, as I swept them, awoke to the stroking of my broom; and in the whisper of broom against floor I heard an awesome voice repeating, “Take me down, down, down .. .”. The music boxes would imperceptibly shift from “The Blue Danube” and tinkle instead, “Where the Werceburger flows, flows, flows .. .” The funeral wreathes rustled, “It goes down, down, down .. .”, and the Graveyard Grass whispered in reply, “But nobody knows where it goes,” until the whole building seemed to be softly chanting its song of terror. Then suddenly the sound would cease abruptly, and I would hear the heavy tread of Herr Grosskopf.

I passed through the Christmas rush in a daze of horror, dominated by that interminable singing and by the occasional glimpses caught of Herr Grosskopf. My panic at the sight of his awful visage finally became so great that I could not look at him without being attacked by a proxysm of will-less trembling, and for hours afterwards my heart would pound painfully. I grew to fear meeting him even more than I feared being sent to the basement; if indeed anything could be more frightening than descending into those eternally dim regions.

After Christmas came inventory, and I worked late New Years Eve to help tabulate the last of the stock. I helped Mr. Schmidt who worked more slowly than the rest, and as we were finishing, the others began clearing the wrapping, counter at the back in preparation of the customary New Years’ celebration. Isenhorst already had donned one of the colorful hats in which the house dealt. Bowls of punch were beginning to appear, and bowls of pretzels and potato chips, as well as sandwiches. Horns and bells were in evidence, and many signs of coming festivity. I, of course, was pleasantly contemplating the preparations, when Mr. Schmidt said, “It is finished except the funeral grass; you will count it. Understand? It is in the little room in the basement. Under the sidewalk. Understand? Well, hurry up.”

The terrible door to the basement gaped wide for me, but I shrank back, unable to summon the courage to pass through it. From behind me came the
voice of Herr Grosskopf. "Vell, vat are you waiting for? Id iss almost midnight." Automatically I plummeted down the stairs, clammy with fear and breathless with panic. Long, dark corridors stretched away on either side, flanked by yawning bins of blackness, the whole but scantly illuminated by my flashlight. In the echo of my footsteps I heard more loudly than ever before, "Take me down, down, down . . .", and the sound almost robbed me of my volition. Only the memory of the figure at the head of the stairs drove me forward. Far in the distance I could see the utterly black opening into the room under the sidewalk, from which long tentacles of fear extended to wrap me in their chilly grip. They drew me inexorably to the dark door, and with each step the singing grew louder in my ears.

Inside the door I found the hanging light and pulled the chain. Wanly the small light illuminated the room. It was small and brick walled. The bricks were coated with fuzzy white mould which gave off a stifling air of decay. The Graveyard Grass was piled on low platforms on the floor. Trembling from my fear of the voice that was now ringing in my very ears, I started to count the green squares. I only succeeded in tumbling a few to the floor before I lost control over my palsied limbs. I strove to sing to drown out the voice that beat upon my mind in unending waves of horror, but the only words my lips could formulate were, "Take me down, down, down, where the Werceburger flows, flows."

The sound of my own voice quavering the dread words so demoralized me I sank to my knees upon the Graveyard Grass and lacked the strength to rise again, nor did I have the will to stop singing. Above my head I could hear the sounds of festivity beginning. Cries of "Happy New Year" and the sound of the horns and rattles penetrated to the room but could not blot out the sound of the weird duet being sung there. "It goes down, down, down, but nobody knows where it goes." But suddenly the voice that accompanied me ceased.

"Ha! Loafig iss id?" Terrified I looked into the blazing face of Herr Grosskopf. His eyes were baleful; his mouth was working furiously, making his dreadful moustaches quiver with rage. I screamed from the depths of my fear, and a terrible pain struck my chest.

And now in the little room under the sidewalk, down in the dark basement of Herr Grosskopf's wholesale house, there are two voices singing an unending duet. The hearty tones of Laughing Jack and my own quavering squeaks chant eternally, "Take me down, down, down, where the Werceburger flows, flows, flows. . ."