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Foreword

In the days before doctors could firmly draw the line between life and death, many people feared being buried alive. In 1852 George Bateson patented his "Life Revival Device," a contraption with a bell at the top of a shaft reaching down into a coffin. Through the shaft ran a rope from the bell to the hands of the possibly un-dead for the un-corpse to ring for rescue. Queen Victoria was so impressed that she bestowed upon him the Order of the British Empire in 1859, an action she may have later regretted. Bateson became so obsessed with premature entombment that he took radical measures to insure himself against such a hideous fate. He gave rise to the expression "Bats in the belfry" when he poured linseed oil over his body and set himself on fire. I dedicate this story to the paradoxical George and to all who have ever sought...

To Build a Better Coffin

By

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St. Louis, Missouri, 1871

Few activities invigorate mind and body so agreeably as a brisk trot to the cemetery on a crisp March night. Short legs a-churn, Ingelfuss Muckenecker bubbled with impatience as he pumped his way to the livery stable past crews scooping up horse manure from the dirt streets of

St. Louis.

Ingle was a balding little man with a body even thinner than his hair. “Old Fussy” as his employees called him when his back was turned, never felt happier than when he could accomplish two things at once. To wit, he atoned for his scanty wisps of hair while proving his Republicanism by wearing a full set of bushy whiskers.

Ingle liked efficiency. To him, forging ahead on two or more fronts at the same time defined the new American spirit. After all, we fulfilled our manifest destiny by claiming every inch of land from sea to shining sea despite backward natives who refused to embrace modern life. What better next step than to improve every task in all directions at cyclone speed?

Ingle cantered his hired bay through the gates of Bellefontaine Cemetery. He spied lanterns and a clutch of men around a mound of dirt. One grunted from the effort of prying open a casket with a crowbar.

Ingle’s heart thumped in his ears. When a dirt-covered digger tucked his nose into the crook of his arm, Ingle’s spirit sagged. Bad sign, that. The digger coughed as he leaned on his spade.

Fearing the worst, Ingle came to a wobbly halt at grave’s edge. The doctor who had summoned him knelt over an open casket. The doctor raised his white gloved hand to stop Ingle from coming closer. “Sorry, Mr. Muckenecker. You’d be better off not to see.”

“I haven’t come all this way to turn coward at sight of the grim reaper’s scythe. A person in my profession sees a good deal of his handiwork.” He slid from the saddle and peered around the doctor’s shoulder.

The doctor pulled down a white silk shroud from the bloated head of a female cadaver. “I warned you this could happen. Gases from putrefaction caused the body to swell. That’s what pulled down her hands and rang the bell.”

Ingle blinked back tears—no—not from seeing his mother in such a state, but because Bateson’s Belfry Coffin had failed—miserably and utterly failed. For two years he had labored to get his hands on the plans and permission to use the patent. Two years wasted.

His dreams of inventing the world’s best coffin melted and began running out his nose. Ingle snuffed them back. He had banked his future on being coffinmaker to the American West. He had already optioned a warehouse to hold the splendid output from the factory he had yet to build.

Dismay set in. His life’s fulfillment demanded that he manufacture countless repositories for the newly rich to spend eternity in comfort. What’s more, in a “Genuine Muckenecker” patrons could go to their final reward with serene hearts. Should their interment have been too hasty, Muckenecker guaranteed a speedy return to the land of the living.

The doctor spat a stream of tobacco juice into the hole in the ground. “You should have embalmed her. One good thing to come out of the War of the Rebellion was arsenic embalming fluid. Never bloat then. Used arsenic on Lincoln himself. Mark my words. Someday embalming will become common as Winkelmeyer beer at Winkelmeyer’s saloon.” He took Ingle’s trembling arm to lead him away.

Over his shoulder, the doctor issued orders to the diggers. “Seal ‘er up and put ‘er down.” He departed with a pat on Ingle’s shoulder. “I wish you had taken my advice.”

As they tipped hats to each other in the shadowy moonlight, Ingle stood straight as a poker. “Don’t apologize. I needed to see for myself.”

Plodding home, Ingle considered what to do. *The doctor says embalming is the way of the future. If he’s right, nobody will want a coffin designed to save people from premature burial.*

That single idea threatened every hope he held dear. No big factory, no millionaire’s wealth.

He might not even be able to afford his fine new townhouse. He envisioned telling his wife he could no longer lavish her with the niceties—carriage and driver, maid, laundress. He shuddered to think what that would mean.

His wife was a big woman, easily twice his weight and a foot taller as well. Ingle blinked back tears—no—not from fearing his wife’s wrath, but because he had failed her—miserably and utterly failed. He didn’t feel love for the giantess he had married, no—not love. Pride. Pride that he could master so imposing a creature.

That was the heart of his problem. He prized Olga and needed most desperately to keep her love—no—not love. Respect. He had gained her esteem by making money to buy her the social position she coveted. Placing her in the upper echelons of St. Louis Society, as she deserved, took heavy pockets.

Ingle’s greatest pleasure was his marriage. The fact that his Olga was well-dowered as well as well-endowed further increased his satisfaction. The thought of his wife dressed in hoopskirts so wide no one could come within eight feet of her created a stir in his loins. Well, that decided things. He had to succeed.

He refused to be crushed by competition and criticism as his father had been. If Ingle could

build a better coffin, he would push Olga to the pinnacle of society while simultaneously vindicating his father's faith in coffins. Enchanted by the twin prospects, he rubbed his hands in anticipation—and warmed them at the same time.

He resolved to redouble his efforts. He might yet win big at the undertaking game. He would provide something everyone needed—a bulwark against death. Or at least a small bulkhead against being buried alive.

As for embalming, he put it out of mind. *Embalming? Ridiculous. Who but the insane would choose arsenic water over blood as the proper fluid for the veins of a deceased beloved?*

Deep in his soul, he knew families did not always look upon their dearly departed with tender feelings. He had been asked on several occasions to build coffins with hidden vials of cyanide or chlorine gas in the coffin rim. When workmen fitted the lid and drove home the nails, the vials were expected to break and spew poison over the body—thus banishing any chance the corpse would make an inconvenient resurrection. Ingle, honorable man that he was, had never complied. He knew others did.

So what if some people preferred dead relative's money over living relatives? Many people bought coffins for themselves. They yearned for life and would snap up the anti-death assurance a Genuine Muckenecker offered.

He took heart and made plans. Even though the hour was only a little past midnight, he aimed himself toward his place of business. By sunup when the shop foreman arrived, Ingle had nearly finished plans for “Muckenecker's Majestic Memorial Coffin.” His six grand improvements would make him the brightest star in the coffin-making heavens.

Bleary-eyed, he handed the plans to the foreman. “Build it.”

While Ingle put on his frock coat and prepared to go home for much needed sleep, the foreman pored over the plans. “I don’t see the size specifications.”

“Must I do everything? Build it big enough to put in all the innovations. And have it done this afternoon.”

The foreman’s head shot up in disbelief. “The most we can do is nail and sand.”

“Well, of course it is. I don’t expect shellac and silk lining.” Thoroughly out of sorts, Ingle barked. “Just make the box—and caulk it so it’s waterproof. You can do that, can’t you?”

Back home, he would have gone straight to bed but for his wife’s insistence on food. Olga hustled up a light breakfast of toast with jam, ham, sausages, grits, bacon, potatoes, eggs, cinnamon streusel coffeecake and boiled carrots. He ate dutifully but did insist on one thing—no coffee.

He slept until past noon, then hurried to his shop without eating a midday meal despite Olga’s pleas that he was already too thin. He felt no hunger for anything but his masterpiece.

To his cheerful distress he found his business had been swamped with orders for cheap plank caskets. “What’s this, a new outbreak of cholera?”

Ingle was half-appalled, half-eager. Cholera had set the cornerstone for his success. He had built coffins as the final place of residence for a goodly number of the 3527 locals who died of cholera in the 1866 epidemic. That lucrative source of business had all but dried up on account of a healthy influx of cash into the St. Louis sewer system. In 1867 the city chalked up a paltry 684 deaths to the dread disease which could turn a pink-cheeked youth into a gray corpse in a single

day.

Ingle could find little cause for optimism in other diseases. Yellow fever seldom traveled as far north as Missouri. Thanks to quinine, malaria had not been fatal since Dr. Sappington led the way. Now doctors routinely doused patients with quinine at the first signs of fever.

Smallpox vaccinations worked when people chose science over superstition. Of course, one could hope for outbreaks of influenza or war, but those were far too undependable for an upstanding church deacon like Ingle.

He would have to make his fortune from the day-to-day death toll—childbirth, fire, accident, pneumonia, suicide and good old reliable “Natural Causes.” The only way to persuade folks to buy his products instead of cheaper ones—or, heaven forbid, be embalmed—was to build a better coffin.

He yelled at the foreman over the din of hammering. “Are you deaf? I asked what happened.”

The foreman cupped his hands to magnify his words, “Riverboat explosion. The owner of the line ordered pine boxes to ship home the dead. Twenty-one orders. He wanted the bodies nailed in as soon as might be. Catfish been at some of them.”

Ingle looked around in confusion. “What about my coffin? Have you done nothing I expressly ordered you to do?”

With a perplexed look on his ruddy face, the foreman motioned toward an immense square wooden box leaning against the wall.

Ingle frowned as he pointed. “That’s the coffin you built for me? How big is it?”

“Seven foot by seven foot. You didn’t say how big to make it, so I added a foot for each of them improvements.”

“What’s wrong with you, man? This box would need at least two four-foot wide burial plots.”

“Easy enough to cut the bracing and take it apart.”

“No, you have your hands full and nowhere even to set up this monstrosity. Go back to work. As usual, I have to do everything myself.”

His next problem was where to put the consarned thing. Every inch of space inside his shop, including his own office, had been commandeered.

Only one option came to mind. Take the big box home. He sent a boy to fetch drayage men as he set about piling up stores of nails, canvas and glue. He left a message for the haulers to stop at the Turnverein Hall after loading box and materials. At the Turner Hall he expected to locate some very special goods he needed for his project.

When his wife saw the huge box, she was more than a little perturbed. “Box too big. It fit nowhere but front parlor. Would ruin carpet from Turkey.”

“Men, roll up the carpet before you set up the sawhorses. Cover the furniture, Olga. The box is going in the parlor.”

“Vhat about new brocade drapes?”

“Cover them too.”

“Cover drapes? Not can be done.”

“Then take them down.”

“Neighbors would stare.”

“They’ll be staring at me. Might be good advertising—a man who works long into the night to build a better coffin.”

Olga raced about to cover furniture with sheets while the maid took down the drapery. Ingle had not thought to bring sawhorses from the shop. Of course, the shop could ill-spare them if he had. He fetched his own pair from the cellar, but they turned out to be woefully inadequate.

He had no choice. He needed to work on the lid as well as the coffin. The parlor simply was not big enough to lay both box and heavy coffin lid on the floor. He had to keep the box on sawhorses even though it teetered when weight was applied to any corner.

Olga flounced off in a snit to dis-invite ladies she had invited for tea. Ingle set to work.

He reasoned thus. To survive when awaking in a grave, a person must—

1. harness mind
2. breathe
3. drink
4. eat
5. obey call of nature
6. get dug up

Goals established, Ingle set about building the prototype for Muckenecker’s Majestic.

First, the occupant must be able to signal the outside world. Ingle drilled a hole in the coffin lid and stuck in an eight-foot length of pipe. Through the pipe, he ran rope attached to a bell at the top—and a policeman’s whistle at the bottom.

To magnify sound, he drilled the side of a brass megaphone and scooted it down over the bell end of the pipe. The megaphone had a happy secondary purpose. It would keep rainwater from gushing in. Wouldn't want a fellow to drown in his own coffin.

Ingle had already achieved his first goal by the time Olga returned home. Still in a huff, she tromped back to the kitchen without a word.

To allow for physical excretion, he nailed a shallow basin on a knob which could move up and down a greased track to accommodate a person of any height. All the undertaker had to do was insert the fanny of the deceased—with rear of clothing cut away. Problem neatly solved.

When Olga called him to supper, he resented leaving work with only two parts of his grand plan finished. Olga said nothing more chatty than “More carrots?” during the entire repast. Ingle was too far lost in his dream to notice. (Ogla served him carrots at every meal—including breakfast—in a moderately successful attempt to deal with Ingle's singular and impressive volume of flatulence.)

After supper, he nailed canvas strips to the coffin ceiling and tucked in sundry items such as hardtack—flour and water crackers so tough they could be used like armor to deflect bullets. He chose hardtack for its indestructibility. Civil War soldiers ate—or tried to eat—hardtack left over from the Mexican War—fifteen years earlier.

Olga announced her intention to retire for the evening. Ingle waved and offered an absent-minded, “Goodnight, my dear.” He chuckled to himself when a random thought occurred. A person must take great care with words. Only the trifling change of “r” to “d” separates “Dear” from “Dead.”

Next to find a home in the canvas straps of the coffin lid came a silver flask of whiskey. After much deliberation, Ingle filled a second flask with wine. He much preferred beer—but wine kept better. Including undrinkable Mississippi River water was quite unthinkable.

In the wee hours of the morning, Olga came downstairs in a disheveled state—graying hair hanging over her shoulder in a long braid. “Please, cannot hammering wait ‘til morning? I cannot get ein vink of sleep.”

“Of course, my dear.” He switched from nails to horse hoof glue.

At last he was ready for the coup de guerre—the innovation that would set his coffin above all others. This one key feature would propel him to the top of his profession and simultaneously elevate Olga to the uppermost ranks of the elite.

He fastened canvas straps to the inside of the coffin lid—two dozen of them, then unveiled his plunder from the Turner Hall, pig innards.

During the Civil War, he had seen boys blowing into peculiar roundish balls used in a game they called “football.” He blew up pig-stomach-footballs until he was light-headed. His stomach ached from the unaccustomed exercise of his diaphragm.

Ingle had paid twice their worth to secure a full dozen of the leathery stomachs—the northside Turnverein’s entire stock. Their life-saving potential made them well worth the price. When oxygen ran low, the undead would simply pull the plug on a football to release a new supply of air.

Last, Ingle considered what a person might need to harness the mind. Comforting reading material. What could be more comforting than Holy Scripture? But how to get light for reading?

Ingle pondered a number of possibilities—kerosene lamp, fireflies. But finally hit upon a miner's lamp with candle—and flint and steel with tinder in a pewter case. With miner's lamp on his or her head, the un-corrupted could have free hands to turn the pages of the Bible.

Ingle added a few other touches to make the coffin more, well, homey. A blanket for warmth, a picture frame directly overhead to contain the image of a loved one, a backscratcher for those hard-to-reach itches, a magnifying glass for weak eyes.

By the time Olga awoke, he had nearly completed his masterpiece. He had even torn out and reset the bracing so as to limit the coffin width to three-and-one-half feet. A properly finished Muckenecker's Majestic would fit tidily in a standard grave plot.

Time for action. He rubbed his hands in anticipation. "Olga, bring the footstool. I need you to help me put the lid on the coffin. Fetch the maid too."

"You know maid not here so early."

"I think the two of us can manage." After they puffed and grunted the lid half on the coffin, he said. "Get in."

"Vhat? Get in coffin?"

He nodded and held out his hand to help her stand atop an ottoman. She heaved a sigh, climbed up and stepped in. The box lurched and nearly crashed. If he had not dropped to his knees to prop the box with his shoulder, the whole business would have toppled.

He steadied the mammoth box with his lower body as the pair of them tugged the lid over her. In seconds Olga began yelling up the pipe. "Gott in Himmel, let me out. Breathe I cannot. Futballs press mein bosom."

“Let the air out of them.”

“Vhat? I cannot hear you.”

He spoke louder. “Pull out the stoppers—the corks.”

“Vait, I get under pipe to hear you.”

When Olga shifted in the box, catastrophe struck. The box and Olga tumbled head down onto Ingle’s chest which crushed him to the floor. When he found himself unable to inhale another single breath, he realized he was not long for this world.

He took comfort in one clear thought as he slipped away. My dearest Olga will prove Muckenecker’s Majestic works. She shall be the richest widow in the state—in the whole country. My Olga will be envied by all as she takes her rightful place as the biggest society matron in the city.

He imagined exquisite adulation for himself in the eyes of his Olga. Inglefuss Muckenecker expired in the throes of an ecstasy both more haughty and more erotic than any he had ever known before.

“I can’t hear you, Ingle. Futballs press me so I cannot move. Not ring bells or toot vhistles. Downside up I am. Fumes iss fire in mein nose. Vine iss pouring on flints, and vhiskey iss soaking Mutter’s Bible.”

(Pause) Can you not hear me, Ingle? Picture of your Bruder iss pipe stopping up. You must make lid more high.”

(Pause) She wheedled. “Ingle, let me out. A vool blanket always give me rash, und magnifying glass sticks me in mein eye.”

(Pause) She adopted a pouting tone. "Schatzie, mein back itches where I cannot reach. (Pause) I have need of outhouse. Mein Schatz, torture me no more."

(Pause) Her voice surged in abrupt puffs strained with panic. "Ingle, Liebe, iss you there?"

(Pause) Her voice came penitent and slow. "Mein Liebling, my lesson have I learned. You put me in box for I spend too much Geld—buy carriage—hire maid. No more. I promise not spend nothing without you say so. I ask you—beg you—for each penny. Please, you must let me out."

(Pause) Her words dissolved into a pitiable low whine. "Please not to murder me. I fire maid. I scrub laundry on vashboard. I beg you let me out."

Her last words came in a wail sad enough to make angels weep. "Ingle, please. Futballs—futballs—in futballs I am smothering. Futballs be the death of me."

The End

