

TWICE BURIED MARY

It had been the wedding of the year; the tenants were delighted for James Elphinstone, Laird of Logie, finally marrying his sweetheart, Mary. Her fabulous lace and silk gown was like nothing that had ever been seen in Inverurie, and that diamond engagement ring! It was a huge solitaire which sparkled fiercely like a star in the heavens. Some folk said the gem had come all the way from the Barents' Sea in Russia.

Mary Elphinstone was just as happy to be the laird's wife. She and James had loved each other since childhood. The week after the honeymoon, however, Mary began to feel faint and sickly. She took to her bed, causing James to fuss and have the housemaids running back and forth with hot drinks and extra blankets for her bed. It was when she stopped eating at all and couldn't be roused that James sent for the family physician. The doctor later exited Mary's bedroom with a grim face. "I'm afraid there's nothing to be done, sir, your wife is dead."

James is hysterical. Dead? How can his beloved Mary be dead? They'd been married less than a month, she was a young, healthy woman, how could she be robbed of life so soon? But sure enough, Mary was pale and cold, a beautiful corpse. James had her dressed in her wedding gown and wrapped in a shroud. Word got out that she was to be buried with that diamond ring, which interested some local graverobbers, always on the look out for fresh corpses to sell to the local anatomy schools at Kings and Marischal Colleges in Aberdeen. Though it was a crime to steal the property of the dead, corpses themselves had no legal status, thus the shortage of cadavers for the medical students was often addressed by digging up a newly-dead person. A fresh cadaver was worth a month's wages, and if the two likely lads could pawn the ring too, they'd be in the money.

Having watched the funeral from afar, James and his younger friend Jock went to the kirkyard in the dead of night, leaving their cart by the entrance. It was Jock who had heard the gossip from a maidservant at Logie House, thus he knew the treasure which lay within. After several cold hours carefully digging out turf and earth, they reached the wooden coffin, then with a crowbar, snapped open the top third of the lid.

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Once the mortcloth was unwrapped, they saw Mary, her hands crossed over her breast, the ring sparkling in their lantern light. "Oh, fit a bonny gem," exclaimed Jamesy. "Haud the licht or I get it aff her finger!"

"Me haud the licht? Fa's the senior partner here?" Jock grumphed.

"Me! Am aulder than thee, now, wheest!" Jamesy snapped and pulled at the ring. He pulled and pulled to no avail, it was stuck completely.

"Fit are ye playin at?" Jock demanded.

"Och, it's stuck on her finger, I'd need some butter or something to ease it aff!" Jamesy replied.

"Are you feel? Far wid we get butter in a graveyard in the middle o the night! Haud the licht, I'll deal wi it!" Jock retorted, thrusting the lantern into Jamesy's hand and took out his pocketknife.

"Fit are ye gaun tae dae?" Jamesy asked in horror.

"Cut her finger aff, she's deid, she's nae gaun to feel it!" Jock began to slice the skin under the ring.

The moment the blood began to flow, both graverobbers got the fright of their lives as the "corpse" sat up screaming. They fled, leaving the lantern on the ground. Mary looked around her and felt icy cold. "James, James, where are you? Where am I?" she cried, her head aching.

"Oh, so you're nae a corpse then?" It was Jamesy, having hidden behind a headstone.

"What? Who are you?" Mary gasped, seeing the man as he approached her. Jamesy grabbed the lantern and shone it in her face.

"Oh, nobody, jist a humble gravedigger. So why are you in a coffin then, if you're nae deid?" he asked with half a smile.

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“Coffin?” Mary scrambled to her feet and fell forward into Jamesy’s arms.

“Now, now, lassie, I’ve got you. Some glaikit doctor thocht ye were deid. They buried ye this mornin,” he explained.

“Oh! All I remember is feeling so terribly tired, and sick, and the light was too bright! I must get home, I can’t stay here!” Mary gasped, then she saw her bloodied hand under the lantern light. “My hand? My finger, I’m bleeding! You! You’re one of those Resurrectionists! You were going to steal my ring and sell me to the surgeons! For shame!” she shrieked and slapped Jamesy’s cheek, causing him to reel backwards.

“Oww! Dinna blame me! We didna ken you were jist sick! Fit div ye expect me tae dae, you’re the wife o a laird, I’m a poor cottar!” Jamesy grumbled.

“Indeed! I am Mrs Mary Elphinstone, and my husband James is known to the Sheriff of Aberdeen, who will deal severely with you!” Mary retorted.

“Huh, it’s your man’s ain servant that should be deal wi, she’s the een that telt us about the diamond! Aa the wye fae Russia she said! Worth a fortune!” Jamesy exclaimed.

“What? What’s her name?”

“Janet, Janet Pirie, her uncle’s the sacrist at Marischal College, George Pirie, it wis him that wis gaun to buy the... your body!” Jamesy confessed.

“Janet! The jealous little madam! Well, she shall not stay a moment longer under our roof. And if you want to avoid a meeting with the Sheriff, you will get me home to Logie House!” Mary demanded. Jock took off his big woollen overcoat and placed it around her shoulders.

“I’m heartily sorry, lassie, I didna ken! Please, I’ll drive ye tae Logie, my cairt is jist outside the gates, that is if Jock hisna run aff wi it!” Jamesy explained.

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Inverurie Kirkyard

Mary was duly taken back to Logie where the family were in mourning. She banged on the door, crying out her husband's name. Inside, the distraught laird exclaimed: "Oh! If I believed in spirits, I would have said that was the voice of my beloved wife calling me!" Kitty, Elphinstone's kitchen maid, a poor, but wise young girl, knew her mistress' voice at once, and ran to the door, flinging it wide to find Mary standing in her gown, happed in Jamesy's coat.

"Oh Mistress! I kent it wis you! You werena deid at all! Yon feel doctor, I kent! Come in oot o the cauld!" little Kitty cried with delight, ushering her in. James was now standing at the top of the stair on the landing and saw them. "Mary? What?" he gaped at her as she ran up the steps to meet him.

"Yes! James, it's me! I wasn't dead at all!" she laughed. James promptly fainted as she flung her arms around him. "Oh, Kitty, he's fainted, silly James!" The uproar brought the rest of the household who cheered and cried in alternate measure at the supernatural deliverance of their dear Mary.

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The rest of James and Mary's life together was uneventful; they lived to a ripe old age, and died within days of each other, having never been out of each other's company since that dreadful incident. The inscription on the headstone reminded everyone of it, Mary Elphinstone, Twice Buried.

This story, although most likely to be fictional, represents the real fears that people had in the late 18th and early 19th centuries of being buried alive, or having a loved one's corpse stolen from the graveyard to be sold to the anatomy schools.

In Aberdeenshire, students themselves from Kings and Marischal Colleges often went out themselves to "lift" a "subject". The more well-off students and the professors could often afford to pay a professional graverobber to do the work for them. Those operating in the countryside often targeted the Travelling people, as they had no fixed abode or legal status, nobody was concerned when they went missing. Stories abound within the Stewart and Robertson families of how their ancestors were murdered by the "Burkers", the nickname taken from Burke and Hare, the Edinburgh serial killers who supplied surgeon Robert Knox. Some are recorded in the School of Scottish Studies' Tobar an Dulchais online database.



Inverurie Kirkyard

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“Twice-Buried Mary” has variants found across Scotland and Ireland; the Irish tale concerns a Marjorie McCall, whose husband claims he will not believe his wife has returned from the dead until his horses appear at the upper window. A servant takes the horses upstairs and then directs his attention as Marjorie stands freezing on the doorstep.

Returning to Mary Elphinstone, who is associated with Inverurie and sometimes Kintore, is supposed to be buried for a second time in the same grave at either one of these cemeteries. Visitors to the grave are warned they may hear knocking coming from below the ground, as Mary may still not be dead! The prosaic explanation is that an underground stream runs through a pipe in the cemetery, and it is the water knocking against the leaden tube that makes the knocking sound. But one should never let the truth get in the way of a good story!