**Shakespeare's Fools: The Grave-diggers in *Hamlet***

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*"Has this fellow no feeling of his business, that he sings at grave-making?"*

It would scarcely seem possible that a grave-yard attached to a church, with a half-dug grave in the foreground, for the scene; midnight or near thereto, for the time; a pickax, a spade, a heap of fresh earth, some human skulls and bones for the properties; and two grave-diggers for the *dramatis personae* would furnish a location and material for comedy and humor, yet in the first scene of the fifth act of the tragedy of "Hamlet," Shakespeare has taken these materials and conditions, and given us a series of incidents, a variety of character, and a dialogue replete with the most delightful comedy, brilliant repartee, ready wit and subtle humor.

The circumstances are these: A young lady attached to the court of the King of Denmark has been drowned. The general opinion being that she committed suicide. In the time of Shakespeare, and prior thereto, such unfortunates were denied Christian burial. Their remains were interred outside of consecrated ground without service or any of the rites of the Church. In fact, it was not unusual to bury them at the intersection of the highways, very deeply, and to drive a strong stake through the body. The object of this barbarous proceeding being, to impale and destroy the evil spirit, which the prevailing superstition supposed to be in possession of the suicide. In the present instance, the King has commanded that the remains of the unfortunate lady should be buried in the consecrated ground of the church-yard.

The King's command, violating all the ancient and accepted traditions of the church, arouses the indignation of the old sexton, who combines the office of grave-digger. To this personage Shakespeare has given such a strong individuality, such a pungency of wit and wealth of humor, together with such delightful touches of nature, making it so true to life, that I cannot but think the poet must have had a prototype in his own observation and experience.

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In the list of characters in the play this personage and his assistant are set down as "Two Clowns as Grave-diggers," but modern editors have separated them in the cast, and called them "First and Second Grave-diggers." This method has been adopted in all the acting editions, and in the following observations I shall so designate them.

The first grave-digger is of a type that may be found in many of our country villages today, - a quaint sententious old fellow "dressed in a little brief authority," and full of his own importance. He has a little knowledge of law, quotes one or two legal phrases in Latin incorrectly, and preaches a crude idea of socialism to his younger assistant, much to the awe and admiration of that simple individual, who addresses his acknowledged superior as "Goodman delver."

I picture the old fellow in my mind as robust of figure, ruddy of feature, with distinct evidences of bibulous taste on his nose and cheeks, a humorous twinkle in his eyes, in spite of an assumed severity, dressed in the homely smock of the peasant of that place and period, and about fifty years of age. He has the courage of his convictions for he has seldom found any one to combat them, so he advances his arguments with the authority of one whose dictum is not to be questioned. Should these fail him, however, he can command the respect of his fellows by a ready tongue and homely wit, as exampled in his dialogue with his subordinate, and later with Prince Hamlet.

He is no respecter of persons: his replies to the questions of Hamlet being as straightforward and blunt as those to his peasant companion, while his replications in the exchange of wit with the former indicate so much irreverence and independence, that it draws from the Prince the significant observation: "By the Lord, Horatio, ... the age is grown so picked that the toe of the peasant comes so near the heel of the courtier, he galls his kibe."

The character of the old sexton bears in some small degree a resemblance to that of "Dogberry" in "Much Ado About Nothing," in its self-importance, but it is more consistent, less bombastic, and never servile.

Our first acquaintance with the old fellow is made at the beginning of the first scene of the fifth act of the play, when he enters the church-yard followed by his assistant, who carries a spade and a mattock. That his mind is disturbed by the violation of ancient traditions is evidenced in his first speech given in the form of a question to his follower: "Is she to be buried in Christian burial that willfully seeks her own salvation?" To which his assistant, evidently a younger man, with the assurance of accurate information, replies: "I tell thee she is; and therefore make her grave straight: the crowner hath sat on her and finds it Christian burial."

Now comes the inherent love of argument in the old man: "How can that be, unless she drowned herself in her own defense?"

The younger man has no reply to this proposition, but contents himself with reiteration: "Why, 'tis found so." To the ordinary peasant of the time this would have concluded the matter, but the sexton, who has small respect for the verdict of the crowner's quest, and perceiving an opportunity to expound his wisdom, proceeds with his argument.

It requires little imagination to realize the pomposity of the sturdy old stickler for tradition, as he emphasizes his points; or to note the syllabic orotundity with which he utters the Latin phrase that he has probably heard in some legal proceedings, and memorized for use at a future time, to awe his adversary with his learning; and to observe the originality of his logic in the conclusion that the lady's death was not accidental. "It must be 'se offendendo'; it cannot be else. For here lies the point: if I drown myself wittingly, it argues an act: and an act hath three branches; it is, to act, to do, and to perform: argal, she drowned herself wittingly,"

His assistant is not without some self-assertion in spite of Latin and logic, and makes a valiant attempt to enter a protest against the old man's prejudiced conclusions. "Nay, but hear you, goodman delver." But the goodman will not be silenced with flattery nor does he propose to honor his youthful disputant with more controversy, but proceeds to demonstrate his theory in a practical fashion. Taking his spade he lays it down on the smooth turf of the church-yard, explaining: "Here lies the water; good." Then at some little distance from the spade he stands the pick or mattock on end: "Here stands the man, good," and taking a position between the two implements, with judicial gravity, he delivers himself as follows: "If the man go to this water and drown himself, it is will he, nill he, he goes; mark you that; but if the water come to him and drown him, he drowns not himself: argal, he that is not guilty of his own death shortens not his own life."

This demonstration almost convinces the rustic skeptic, but he is still in doubt as to the legal aspect of the case, and inquires: "But is this law?" "Ay, marry, is't; downer's quest law," concludes the old man.

Finding no argument to combat this conclusion, the young fellow falls back on the elemental socialistic question of human inequality. "Will you ha' the truth on't? If this had not been a gentlewoman, she should have been buried out o' Christian burial." The old fellow fully indorses this proposition, and emphasizes it with a still more forcible example, though, perhaps some may not recognize the advantages of the special privileges quoted. "Why, there thou sayest: and the more pity that great folks should have countenance in this world to drown or hang themselves, more than their even-Christian. Come, my spade." The old man takes his spade, but before proceeding to work, asserts the natural dignity of his trade, and bemoans the degeneracy of the age; which provokes the following bit of delightful equivoque:

*1st Gra*. There is no ancient gentlemen but gardeners, ditchers and grave-makers: they hold up Adam's profession.
*2nd Gra*. Was he a gentleman?
*1st Gra*. A' the first that ever bore arms.
*2nd Gra*. Why, he had none.
*1st Gra*. What, art a heathen? How dost thou understand the Scripture? The Scripture says Adam digged: Could he dig without arms?

After a hearty laugh at the jest, the old fellow propounds a conundrum, a very popular form of entertainment among simple country wits. However, to realize the significance of the riddle and the preceding dialogue, it is essential to have the full picture in one's mind: the solemn background of the church, the grim environment of the old headstones and tombs, ghostlike in the midnight shadows, the newly made grave waiting for its tenant, the odor of the fresh earth, and the homely figures of the two sextons with the dismal tools of their trade, form a combination in strong contrast with the humor of the dialogue, and yet in complete harmony with the spirit of the occasion. The old grave-digger standing with one foot on his spade, his eyes sparkling with humor, emphasizes with his index finger the question that is to confuse the wits of his younger assistant; the other leaning on the mattock listens with parted lips, eager to catch every word, and match his wit against that of the veteran humorist.

"What is he that builds stronger than either the mason, the shipwright, or the carpenter?"

The young man is puzzled for a moment, scratches his head, then with a look of triumph, answers quickly: "The gallows-maker; for that frame outlives a thousand tenants."

It is a good answer and the old fellow is not slow to acknowledge it, but it is not the correct one, so the momentary satisfaction of the young man is turned to chagrin, and his wits spurred to another effort. How the old fellow chuckles as the young one wrestles with the knotty problem, and how deliciously is the patronage of the old egotist's superior wisdom expressed in the passage that follows: "I like thy wit well, in good faith: The gallows does well: but how does it well? It does well to those that do ill: now thou dost ill to say the gallows is built stronger than the church: argal: the gallows may do well to thee. To't again, come."

The young man repeats the proposition: "Who builds stronger than a mason, a shipwright, or a carpenter?" and ruefully struggles to find another fitting reply. But his mental faculties are dull, it is beyond him, he has to confess it, and the old fellow does not spare him, but accentuates his triumph, and completes the poor fellow's humiliation by giving the answer, and then dismissing him to fetch a stoop of liquor.

"Cudgel thy brains no more about it, for your dull ass will not mend his pace with beating, and when you are asked this question next, say 'a grave-maker': the houses that he makes last till doomsday. Go, get thee to Yaughan, fetch me a stoop of liquor."

The traditional business at this point was for the old grave-digger to remove with great deliberation a number of vests or waist-coats of various colors and patterns, carefully fold and lay them at one side, and then roll up his sleeves before descending into the uncompleted grave to proceed with his work. This absurd piece of business has, however, long since been discarded, and the actor of to-day plays the part with more appropriate action, consistent with the character, and within scope of human possibility. Laying his spade and pick by the side of the grave he gradually lowers himself into it with the natural effort of a man of his age, then in a workman-like manner proceeds first to loosen the earth with his pick, then to throw it out, together with the skulls and bones as the dialogue calls for them, chanting the words of the old ballad at the proper cues, emphasizing the effort, and punctuating his singing with the strokes of his mattock, and the work of the spade.

It is at this point that Prince Hamlet and his friend Horatio appear outside of the low wall that encloses the grave-yard. Seeing the old man's grim occupation, and hearing his humorous song, the incongruity of the proceeding surprises the Prince, who inquires of his friend: "Has this fellow no feeling of his business that he sings at grave-making?" To which Horatio sagely replies: "Custom hath made it in him a property of easiness."

Unconscious of observation, the sexton continues his work and his song, throwing out the earth, some human bones, and two chapless skulls; while the Prince and his friend look on and philosophize on the gruesome relics that are so irreverently handled by the old man. The second skull thrown from the grave is about to roll away, when the sexton strikes it sharply with his spade to imbed it in the soft, fresh earth. This apparent brutal indifference to the grim remains of poor mortality is the subject of further speculative philosophy on the part of the Prince, who finally steps over the wall, advances to the side of the grave, and addresses the grave-digger, asking: "Who's grave's this, sirrah"?"

I imagine the old man has been asked this question so frequently, and by all manner of people, that he has grown impatient at the query, and with scarcely a glance at his questioner he answers abruptly, "Mine, sir," and continues his work and his song.

I recall when I was a very small boy, living in an English country village, an old cobbler, whose shop, or rather stall, was on the side of the street by which I went to school. He was a quaint, good-natured old fellow, and I would frequently stop, watch him at work and talk to him. All of his work was done by hand. He used to sit at the end of a low bench on which were all of his materials and tools, in little square compartments. He wore a large pair of spectacles with horn frames, and would bend over a wooden last, held fast to his knee by a circular leathern strap from his foot, make holes with an awl, insert and draw the wax end tightly, as he attached the upper to the sole of the shoe he was making. I used to regard him with great interest, and wonder at his dexterity and rapidity. I knew practically everybody in the village, and with boyish curiosity would ask the old cobbler who the shoes were for. He would invariably reply: "Mr. Wearem." This puzzled me for some time, as I knew no one of that name; but ultimately I comprehended: it was a reproof to my curiosity, the old man's standing jest, and a whimsical evasion of the question he was asked so frequently. I find a parallel in my old cobbler's jest and the grave-digger's reply to Hamlet.

The Prince, however, is not disposed to be silenced by this discourtesy, but makes a rejoinder that bluntly charges the old man with a lie. Against this accusation the grave-digger stoutly defends himself, and makes countercharge with a shrewd wit in a dialogue replete with ingenious punning, and a crude logic that carries his point, and compels recognition from the Prince, who diplomatically changes the subject.

To facilitate the reader's appreciation, I quote the dialogue that follows the grave-digger's reply:

*Ham*. I think it be thine indeed, for thou liest in't.
*Gra*. You lie out on't, sir, and therefore 'tis not yours: for my part, I do not lie in't and yet, it is mine.
*Ham*. Thou dost lie in't, to be in't and to say it is thine: 'tis for the dead, not for the quick: therefore thou liest.
*Gra*. 'Tis a quick lie, sir, 'twill away again from me to you.
*Ham*. What man dost thou dig it for?
*Gra*. For no man, sir.
*Ham*. What woman then?
*Gra*. For none neither.
*Ham*. Who is to be buried in't?
*Gra*. One that was a woman sir, but, rest her soul, she's dead.
\* \* \* \* \* \* \* \*
*Ham*. How long hast thou been a grave-maker?

The answer is given with characteristic loquacity, by the old man, who still maintains his reputation as a wit-snapper.

The most casual reader of Shakespeare cannot but observe how much is connoted as well as expressed in many of the brief passages of the poet. In answer to the above simple question, the valor of the late King, and the martial character of the Danes is suggested; we are told the day of Hamlet's birth; we learn of the gossip of the people and the general impression of the Prince's mental condition, the supposed reason of his despatch to England, together with some satirical allusions to the people of that country; and, while the old man ingeniously reveals the age of Hamlet, he incidentally suggests his own. "I have been sexton here, man and boy, thirty years."

This, granting he was about twenty years old when he began his work as a grave-maker, and it is improbable to suppose that he would be entrusted with such serious work at an earlier age, would make him fifty at this time, as I have before suggested.

Hamlet's next question: "How long will a man lie in the earth ere he rot?" provokes more punning by the old man and some very plain and original reasoning as to the time and process of the decay of mortal remains; those of a tanner in particular.

The dialogue is terminated by the selection of one of the skulls by the grave-digger to illustrate his arguments, which the old man asserts is the skull of Yorick, the late King's jester.

The "property of easiness," suggested by Horatio, is again exampled by the irreverence and familiarity with which the grave-maker handles this skull. As he recalls the pranks of the dead jester, he laughingly slaps the hollow temples of the unconscious remnant, as if he were boxing the ears of the living jester, and gleefully chuckles as memory revives the "mad rogue's" wit and humor, before handing it to the Prince.

This incident diverts the mind of Hamlet from his catechism of the grave-digger to tender memories of his childhood's friend and playmate, so that the sentiment of the scene is changed, but to this I have referred at some length in a former chapter.

The funeral procession enters the church-yard, the sexton assists in lowering the body of the unfortunate lady to its last resting place, and with that duty done, the character of the grave-digger in the play is concluded. But if we permit our imagination a little scope, we might see, after the funeral party has left the scene, the old fellow shoveling the earth back into the newly-tenanted grave, and hear the refrain of his quaint song borne upon the stillness of the early morning air:

A pick-axe, and a spade, a spade,
For and a shrouding sheet:
O a pit of clay for to be made
For such a guest is meet.

The most conspicuous figure that I can recall as a representative of the first grave-digger, was the late J. H. McVicker, founder and proprietor of McVicker's Theater, Chicago. He played the part when on tour with Edwin Booth, his son-in- law, who was then under his management. I had the honor of being Mr. Booth's principal support, and played the part of Laertes. Mr. McVicker was of Irish and Scotch descent, and combined the general characteristics of those two nationalities. He was strong in his own opinions, somewhat harsh and dictatorial in his manner, but with a vein of quaint humor that was much in evidence when not obsessed with business. Hardly the temperament for an artist, you would say? True! but in the case of the old sexton these very qualities fitted the character. Mr. McVicker used little if any make-up, in fact he did not need any; he was at this time, I should judge, about sixty years of age, rotund of figure, full in the face, which was clean-shaven, and with sparse gray hair, that was always disheveled. He dressed the part in a dark brown tunic or smock; his arms were bare, but his legs and feet were encased in rough buskins and sandals. He looked the part to perfection; he did not have to act, only to speak the lines, and he was the old grave-digger. The self-importance, the grave assumption of knowledge, and the air of "brief authority" over his fellow- worker were finely given; while his surprised expression at the audacity of the younger man in questioning his judgment was a splendid illustration of the assurance of ignorance and self-conceit.

At the time of which I speak very little, if any, scenery and few properties were carried by touring dramatic companies. We carried none, but depended on the stock of the theaters we visited for the scenery, and borrowed the properties and furniture from local stores, giving in return complimentary tickets to the performance. The two human skulls were especially difficult to obtain in the smaller towns.

Our property-man, however, was of considerable experience and full of resource in an emergency and when unable to obtain the real article invariably found a substitute that served the purpose. For the skulls he used two large turnips, shaping them like the human head, excavating the eye sockets, hollowing the jaws and mouth, and then coloring them with brown paint. Indeed, they looked remarkably well and few of the audience could detect the imposition from the front of the theater. One night, however, when Mr. McVicker, as the grave-digger, handed the supposed skull to Mr. Booth, as Hamlet, the latter gentleman failed to grasp it securely and it fell with a heavy thud to the stage. The deception was then obvious, and the audience roared with laughter. But worse consequences followed. The confounded turnip rolled down to the footlights, knocked off one of the tips of the gas jets (electricity was not then in use), a big flame rose from the broken jet, a cry of Fire! was raised, and a panic in the audience was only averted by the prompt action of the leader of the orchestra, who reached over and smothered the flaming gas-jet with his pocket handkerchief.

On another occasion during our Southern tour, Mr. McVicker called me on one side prior to the beginning of the last act of Hamlet, and whispered in my ear, "Watch me when I hand Edwin the skull to-night." I watched.

It appeared that our property-man had been unable to obtain even turnips with which to fashion skulls for the grave-yard scene, so he had procured a couple of very large Bermuda onions, cut and perforated them as he had done the, turnips, colored, and placed them in the grave: Mr. McVicker alone being cognizant of the character of the remains. The grave-digger threw them out at the proper cue, and the deception passed unnoticed, but, when the old sexton handed the supposed skull of poor dead Yorick to Mr. Booth, who had a particular aversion to onions in any form, the aroma of that mutilated sphere, mingled with the odor of the paint, became so offensive to him that he was seized with nausea, and with difficulty completed the delivery of his tender apostrophe to the remains of his dead friend. However, his final questions to Horatio, as he handed, with unusual alacrity the repulsive vegetable to that gentleman: "Dost thou think Alexander looked o' this fashion i' the earth'? And smelt so? pah!" had a significance that heretofore had not been in evidence. Subsequently Mr. Booth joined in a hearty laugh at the incident, and shortly afterwards two human skulls were purchased for the performance.

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