

*The
Undying
of
Obedience
Wellrest*



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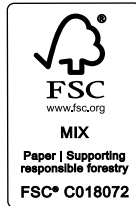
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For Dave

SPRING 1832



I NED

For my fifteenth birthday, my grandfather let me dig my own grave.

It was dawn when he woke me. He was standing over my bed with an oil lamp in one hand and a brand-new shovel in the other. I remember how bright its blade was in the darkness. I think he had been awake all night, going at it with his whetstone.

‘Happy birthday,’ he said. ‘Shall we get started?’

He laid the shovel next to me on the bed, then opened the door of the cottage and went out into the morning.

I got up and dressed quickly. My shirt and trousers were still hanging above the washing tub, damp, because Pa – my grandfather, I mean – had insisted I make an effort to be clean for such an important day. I did not see the point of washing either my clothes or myself if I was just going to get covered in mud again, but I did as I was told. I put on my boots and second-best hat, since a crow had stolen my favourite some weeks earlier. I ate four of Pa’s oatcakes and

put another four in my pockets. Mosca was asleep in his jam jar, but I took him with me in my satchel because I knew he would be furious with me if he missed anything. Mosca is my pet fly. Back then he was probably my closest friend besides my grandfather. People say you can't tell one fly from another, but whoever says that knows as much about flies as they do about gravedigging.

There was a mist in the graveyard that morning, as I recall: wet and thick as cold soup. I could make out the church steeple and the great, dark boughs of the yew trees but the rest of the village had disappeared, and it felt like Pa and I were the only two living souls in the whole world. In a way that was true: we were the only two souls in *our* little world, unless you count Mosca and the birds and the animals in the churchyard.

I followed Pa's lamp along the path and through the cluttered headstones of the Old Quarter, hefting the shovel, enjoying its weight. I ran my finger over the blade. It was keen as a butcher's knife. Pa spoke over his shoulder.

'Now. You will remember that the soil in the New Quarter is a sandy loam.'

'Yes, Pa.'

'Not an ounce of clay in it.'

'Yes, Pa.'

'So you will need to be careful that the sides do not collapse.'

'I remember what you said.'

'And keep things neat. Most people think that gravedigging is just about—'

‘Digging a hole. But it is not. I know, Pa.’

‘Good. Remember, this plot is going to be somebody’s home until Judgement Day. They will spend more time in their grave than any other place during their time on the earth, so make sure it is one that they will be happy in.’

Perhaps I should have been clearer from the start: when I say I was digging my own grave, the grave was not *for* me. It was for someone else. What I mean is that Pa let me dig it all by myself. Up until then, he was the one who always did the hard work, and I just had to watch, and listen, and take notes, and bring him his tea when he got thirsty. Now, in my fifteenth year, I had earned a shovel all of my own.

‘Who is the new resident?’ I asked.

‘Lady from the village,’ said Pa. ‘Grammy Hickson. Nearly ninety years old, so the vicar said. A good run, by any reckoning.’

‘Do you think she will be happy here?’

‘I am sure she will, Ned. She won’t be wanting for company, at least. Given her age, I dare say she knows most of the people buried here.’

The thought made me glad.

‘I shall dig her quite the smartest grave that the village has ever seen!’ I said. ‘It will be the envy of the other residents!’

‘That’s the spirit,’ said Pa. ‘You will be in charge of the whole place when I am gone, so start as you mean to continue.’

To underscore this gloomy thought he coughed several times into his handkerchief, opened it to see what was

inside, and then balled it up tightly as if it contained a secret. He had been coughing and wheezing for months, and by now I had stopped asking him if he was unwell, because the answer seemed to trouble him.

I watched him tuck the handkerchief into his top pocket and said nothing. My gladness was darkened somewhat. It's funny how even when you are surrounded by the dead you expect the people you love to be around for ever.

We left the Old Quarter and its great black yew trees and passed by the Nameless Grave, almost completely reclaimed by ivy, now. The church emerged from the mist and we took the passage around the side into the New Quarter.

'Here will do,' said Pa at the end of a row of headstones. He folded his arms and looked at me with his one good eye. It was almost silent in the graveyard. The only sound was Mosca buzzing in his jam jar.

'All right,' I said. 'Shall I just start digging then?'

'*Just start digging*, he says! I thought this was to be the smartest plot in the whole village?'

'It is!'

'Then you can't just start shovelling willy-nilly, can you?'

'No, I know. Sorry, Pa.'

'Then what are you going to do first?'

I looked in my satchel. First I took Mosca out so he could watch everything. He scuttled in quick little circles around the bottom of his jar and rubbed his back legs together. He seemed annoyed about something. I took out the two spindles of string we use for measuring the plots and began to stake out the area. When I was done, Pa inspected the

dimensions and then perched himself on the edge of the next headstone along.

‘Very good,’ he said. ‘Now then. Let’s see how you handle that new shovel of yours.’

I set to work, Pa watching me the whole time with his good right eye while the other one rolled crazily in its socket. The sun came up and burnt away the mist and the New Quarter was as charming as I had ever seen it. Graveyards have a reputation for being gloomy places, but you should have seen ours in the springtime. Bluebells and marigolds and bright-pink campion. New ivy so green it seemed to shimmer with a light of its own.

I dug and I sang and I could not have been happier. The shovel was quite a marvellous piece of engineering. It was sharp and precise and very easy to wield. I cut and dispatched the soil with the efficiency of Pa working through a plate of liver. After half an hour the earth was up to my waist and after an hour I was in over my head. I called up to my grandfather, who by then had been quiet for a good while.

‘What do you think, Pa?’ I said. ‘I have to say, I am rather proud of it! A stonemason couldn’t get smoother edges than this.’

Pa did not reply. I worried I had done something wrong. Or perhaps I had spoken too vainly about my work.

‘I know it’s not perfect, by any means. But it must be nearly six feet by now. I can’t see over the top. Could you pass me the string? Pa?’

There was silence again.

‘Mosca?’

He buzzed distantly.

I hung on to the edge of the grave and hauled myself out. The sun was high and very hot by now and there was steam on the inside of Mosca’s jar that seemed to be causing him some discomfort. I unscrewed the lid and he straight away flew up into one of my nostrils – his way of reprimanding me – and then off in the direction of the church.

‘Well,’ I said, ‘there’s no need to be like that.’

I tracked the erratic path of his flight and saw Pa on the far side of the graveyard. He was talking to the vicar. The vicar had a shining cassock and a rod-straight back and next to him Pa looked even more hunched and shabby than usual. His old coat and gloves were stained and full of holes. They were both looking at something on the ground. Pa was shaking his head.

I picked up Mosca’s jar and went down the path towards the church with the shovel over one shoulder.

I knew something was wrong before I heard what they were talking about. The headstone in front of them was at a very strange angle, and the earth at its base was very uneven. I had not noticed when we first arrived because of all the mist, but in the clear spring light I could not conceal my horror. Someone or something had disturbed the plot.

The vicar, Reverend Biles, was speaking to Pa in a low monotone while my grandfather tugged anxiously at the ends of his sleeves. The vicar heard me coming and turned and looked at me without expression, his face another grey tombstone. He looked at Mosca’s jar and frowned slightly.

Then he turned back to my grandfather without acknowledging me.

‘I must admit,’ said Reverend Biles, ‘I am slightly at a loss as to how this escaped your notice after our last conversation.’

‘Forgive me, Reverend, we – me and the boy—’ He gestured in my direction but the vicar was done looking at me, it seemed. ‘We have always taken every care to keep a watchful eye over the residents.’

The vicar pulled a grim expression.

‘Residents?’

‘I mean the parishioners. The deceased.’

A pause.

‘I would be more inclined to believe you if it had not happened twice this year already.’

Twice? Pa had never mentioned anything of the sort to me.

‘I’m sorry, Reverend. Really I am. Only it is the boy’s birthday, and last night I was sharpening his shovel, and I suppose I was distracted.’

Reverend Biles looked at me again and I showed him the shovel with some pride.

‘Many happy returns, I am sure,’ he said. ‘But that is really no excuse.’

‘I know, Reverend,’ said Pa.

The vicar sighed.

‘Well, now you both have shovels, you can at least tidy it up twice as quickly.’

‘Tidy it up?’ said Pa.

‘Yes,’ said the vicar. ‘Make it good as new. Before the mourners arrive for Mrs Hickson.’

‘But the relatives—’

‘The families would rather not know. I am certain of that. Fill this in and straighten the stone and we shall forget all about it.’

‘But—’

‘Much better for you, too, if the families do not know. Wouldn’t you say?’

I looked at them both. Pa didn’t reply.

‘We all know what the villagers think of you, and we know what they would do if they were to discover any of this . . . unpleasantness.’ His long, bony finger wavered between the two of us. ‘You would do well to keep your mouths closed, or you’ll both be on the gibbet before you’ve time to take your hats off.’

‘Yes, Reverend.’

‘Very well, then. Make it right. And be sure it does not happen again.’

Pa started coughing once more and took out his mangled and damp-looking handkerchief. The vicar wrinkled his nose. He looked at me and then turned and went billowing towards the dark archway of the church door.

With nobody standing in the way I finally got a good look at the disturbed grave. As a sexton it was really the last thing in the world you would hope to see. It was an awful mess, the headstone moments from falling flat and the soil piled in loose mounds as if a dog had been at it. Pa waited for the church door to close and nudged at the dirt with the toe

of his huge boot.

‘Barely been in the ground a fortnight,’ he said.

‘I remember. Young Robert Garrick, was it not?’

‘And his wife. Damnable cholera.’

We looked at the grave in silence.

‘Who do you think did it?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘It was probably foxes,’ I said. ‘Or moles. You know what they’re like.’

Pa straightened up and gave me a tired smile.

‘Quite possibly,’ he said.

‘Why don’t I ask our neighbours?’

‘As you wish, Ned.’

Mosca had been flying in exploratory circles around the disturbed plot and finally came to rest in his customary spot on the tip of my ear. We went to the four corners of the graveyard and asked if anyone knew anything, in the yew trees, in the brambles, in the gutters of the church roof. The crow had seen nothing, and the family of foxes were asleep. The magpies just laughed and chattered nonsense, as per usual, and then got angry when I wouldn’t let them eat Mosca.

I came back to Pa empty-handed. He was already patting and smoothing the earth on the top of the grave.

‘No one seems to know anything,’ I said.

Pa stood and leant on my shovel.

‘No surprises there. It is no one’s job to keep watch but ours. We shall have to keep our eyes open from now on. Both of us.’

‘The vicar said it had happened before. You never told me that.’

‘No, I didn’t. I am sorry.’

I waited for him to explain but apparently this was all he had to say on the matter.

‘He didn’t mean the part about the villagers, did he?’ I said.

‘Which part?’

‘About the gibbet. About hanging.’

He paused to examine the headstone and eventually said: ‘No, Ned. Of course not. It would never come to that.’

I felt a tickle on the back of my neck that I thought was Mosca, but from the corner of my eye I saw him perusing the daffodils a few feet away. I watched Pa get on to his haunches to try and straighten the great stone slab. I will admit I am not the cleverest person in the village – I am not even the cleverest person in the churchyard – but I know when someone is not telling the truth.