

Robert Southey (1774-1843)

17 *The Surgeon's Warning*

The subject of this parody was suggested by a friend, to whom also I am indebted for some of the stanzas.

Respecting the patent coffins herein mentioned, after the manner of Catholic Poets, who confess the actions they attribute to their Saints and Deity to be but fiction, I hereby declare that it is by no means my design to depreciate that useful invention; and all persons to whom this Ballad shall come are requested to take notice, that nothing herein asserted concerning the aforesaid coffins is true, except that the maker and patentee lives by St. Martin's Lane.

The Doctor whisper'd to the Nurse,  
And the Surgeon knew what he said;  
And he grew pale at the Doctor's tale,  
And trembled in his sick-bed.

"Now fetch me my brethren, and fetch them with speed," 5  
The Surgeon affrighted said;  
"The Parson and the Undertaker,  
Let them hasten or I shall be dead."

The Parson and the Undertaker  
They hastily came complying, 10  
And the Surgeon's Prentices ran up stairs  
When they heard that their Master was dying.

The Prentices all they enter'd the room,  
By one, by two, by three;  
With a sly grin came Joseph in, 15  
First of the company.

The Surgeon swore as they enter'd his door,  
'T was fearful his oaths to hear, . .  
"Now send these scoundrels out of my sight,  
I beseech ye, my brethren dear!" 20

He foam'd at the mouth with the rage he felt,  
And he wrinkled his black eye-brow,

“That rascal Joe would be at me, I know,  
But zounds, let him spare me now!”

Then out they sent the Prentices, 25  
The fit it left him weak,  
He look’d at his brothers with ghastly eyes,  
And faintly struggled to speak.

“All kinds of carcasses I have cut up,  
And now my turn will be; 30  
But, brothers, I took care of you,  
So pray take care of me.

“I have made candles of dead men’s fat,  
The Sextons have been my slaves,  
I have bottled babes unborn, and dried 35  
Hearts and livers from rifled graves.

“And my Prentices now will surely come  
And carve me bone from bone,  
And I who have rifled the dead man’s grave  
Shall never have rest in my own. 40

“Bury me in lead when I am dead,  
My brethren, I entreat,  
And see the coffin weigh’d, I beg,  
Lest the plumber should be a cheat.

“And let it be solder’d closely down, 45  
Strong as strong can be, I implore;  
And put it in a patent coffin,  
That I may rise no more.

“If they carry me off in the patent coffin,  
Their labour will be in vain; 50  
Let the Undertaker see it bought of the maker,  
Who lives by St. Martin’s Lane.

“And bury me in my brother’s church,  
For that will safer be;  
And I implore, lock the church door, 55

And pray take care of the key.

“And all night long let three stout men  
The vestry watch within;  
To each man give a gallon of beer,  
And a keg of Holland’s gin; 60

“Powder and ball and blunderbuss,  
To save me if he can,  
And eke five guineas if he shoot  
A Resurrection Man.

“And let them watch me for three weeks, 65  
My wretched corpse to save;  
For then I think that I may stink  
Enough to rest in my grave.”

The Surgeon laid him down in his bed,  
His eyes grew deadly dim, 70  
Short came his breath, and the struggle of death  
Did loosen every limb.

They put him in lead when he was dead,  
And with precaution meet,  
First they the leaden coffin weigh, 75  
Lest the plumber should be a cheat.

They had it solder’d closely down,  
And examin’d it o’er and o’er,  
And they put it in a patent coffin  
That he might rise no more. 80

For to carry him off in a patent coffin,  
Would, they thought, be but labour in vain,  
So the Undertaker saw it bought of the maker,  
Who lives by St. Martin’s Lane.

In his brother’s church they buried him, 85  
That safer he might be;  
They lock’d the door, and would not trust  
The Sexton with the key.

And three men in the vestry watch  
To save him if they can, 90  
And should he come there to shoot they swear  
A Resurrection Man.

And the first night by lanthorn light  
Through the church-yard as they went,  
A guinea of gold the Sexton shew'd 95  
That Mister Joseph sent.

But conscience was tough, it was not enough,  
And their honesty never swerved,  
And they bade him go with Mister Joe  
To the Devil as he deserved. 100

So all night long by the vestry fire  
They quaff'd their gin and ale,  
And they did drink, as you may think,  
And told full many a tale.

The Cock he crew cock-a-doodle-doo, 105  
Past five! the watchmen said;  
And they went away, for while it was day  
They might safely leave the dead.

The second night by lanthorn light  
Through the church-yard as they went, 110  
He whisper'd anew, and shew'd them two  
That Mister Joseph sent.

The guineas were bright and attracted their sight,  
They look'd so heavy and new,  
And their fingers itch'd as they were bewitch'd, 115  
And they knew not what to do.

But they waver'd not long, for conscience was strong  
And they thought they might get more,  
And they refused the gold, but not  
So rudely as before. 120

So all night long by the vestry fire  
They quaff'd their gin and ale,  
And they did drink, as you may think,  
And told full many a tale.

The third night as by lanthorn light 125  
Through the church-yard they went,  
He bade them see, and shew'd them three  
That Mister Joseph sent.

They look'd askaunce with greedy glance, 130  
The guineas they shone bright,  
For the Sexton on the yellow gold  
Let fall his lanthorn light.

And he look'd sly with his roguish eye, 135  
And gave a well-timed wink,  
And they could not stand the sound in his hand,  
For he made the guineas chink.

And conscience, late that had such weight, 140  
All in a moment fails,  
For well they knew that it was true  
A dead man tells no tales.

And they gave all their powder and ball,  
And took the gold so bright,  
And they drank their beer and made good cheer,  
Till now it was midnight.

Then, though the key of the church-door 145  
Was left with the Parson, his brother,  
It open'd at the Sexton's touch, . . .  
Because he had another.

And in they go with that villain Joe, 150  
To fetch the body by night,  
And all the church look'd dismally  
By his dark-lanthorn light.

They laid the pick-axe to the stones,

And they moved them soon asunder;  
They shovell'd away the hard-prest clay, 155  
And came to the coffin under.

They burst the patent coffin first,  
And they cut through the lead;  
And they laugh'd aloud when they saw the shroud,  
Because they had got at the dead. 160

And they allow'd the Sexton the shroud,  
And they put the coffin back;  
And nose and knees they then did squeeze  
The Surgeon in a sack.

The watchmen as they past along 165  
Full four yards off could smell,  
And a curse bestow'd upon the load  
So disagreeable.

So they carried the sack a-pick-a-back,  
And they carved him bone from bone, 170  
But what became of the Surgeon's soul  
Was never to mortal known.

1798

(From *The Poetical Works of Robert Southey*. Vol. 6.  
Collected by Himself. 10 vols. London, 1838)