

W. Harrison Ainsworth (1805-82)

6 *The Old Oak Coffin*

Sic ego componi versus in ossa velim. — TIBULLUS.

In a churchyard, upon the sward, a coffin there was laid,
And leaning stood, beside the wood, a sexton on his spade.
A coffin old and black it was, and fashioned curiously,
With quaint device of carved oak, in hideous fantasie.

For here was wrought the sculptured thought of a tormented face, 5
With serpents lithe that round it writhe, in folded strict embrace.
Grim visages of grinning fiends were at each corner set,
And emblematic scrolls, mort-heads, and bones together met.

“Ah, well-a-day!” that sexton grey unto himself did cry,
“Beneath that lid much lieth hid — much awful mystery. 10
It is an ancient coffin from the abbey that stood here;
Perchance it holds an abbot’s bones, perchance those of a frere.

“In digging deep, where monks do sleep, beneath yon cloister shrined,
That coffin old, within the mould, it was my chance to find;
The costly carvings of the lid I scraped full carefully, 15
In hope to get at name or date, yet nothing could I see.

“With pick and spade I’ve plied my trade for sixty years and more,
Yet never found, beneath the ground, shell strange as that before;
Full many coffins have I seen — have seen them deep or flat,
Fantastical in fashion — none fantastical as that.” 20

And saying so, with heavy blow, the lid he shattered wide,
And, pale with fright, a ghastly sight that sexton grey espied;
A miserable sight it was, that loathsome corpse to see,
The last, last, dreary, darksome stage of fall’n humanity.

Though all was gone, save reeky bone, a green and grisly heap, 25
With scarce a trace of fleshy face, strange posture did it keep.
The hands were clench’d, the teeth were wrench’d, as if the wretch had risen,
E’en after death had ta’en his breath, to strive and burst his prison.

The neck was bent, the nails were rent, no limb or joint was straight;
Together glued, with blood imbued, black and coagulate. 30
And, as the sexton stooped him down to lift the coffin plank,
His fingers were defiled all o'er with slimy substance dank.

“Ah, well-a-day!” that sexton grey unto himself did cry,
“Full well I see how Fate’s decree foredoomed this wretch to die;
A living man, a breathing man, within the coffin thrust, 35
Alack! alack! the agony ere he returned to dust.”

A vision drear did then appear unto that sexton’s eyes;
Like that poor wight before him straight he in a coffin lies.
He lieth in a trance within that coffin close and fast;
Yet though he sleepeth now, he feels he shall awake at last. 40

The coffin then, by reverend men, is borne with footsteps slow,
Where tapers shine before the shrine, where breathes the requiem low;
And for the dead the prayer is said, for the soul that is *not* flown —
Then all is drown’d in hollow sound, the earth is o’er him thrown!

He draweth breath — he wakes from death to life more horrible; 45
To agony! such agony! no living tongue may tell.
Die! die he must, that wretched one! he struggles — strives in vain;
No more heaven’s light, nor sunshine bright, shall he behold again.

“Gramercy, Lord!” the sexton roar’d, awakening suddenly,
“If this be dream, yet doth it seem most dreadful so to die. 50
Oh, cast my body in the sea! or hurl it on the shore!
But nail me not in coffin fast — no grave will I dig more.”

(From *Ballads: Romantic, Fantastical, and Humorous*. London, 1855)