

Pompe Funèbre

By Robert W. Chambers

*A wind-swept sky
The waste of moorland stretching to the west.
The sea, low moaning in a strange unrest—
A seagull's cry.*

*Washed by the tide.
The rocks lie sullen in the waning light;
The foam breaks in long strips of hungry white.
Dissatisfied. BATEMAN.*

In the days when the keepers of the house shall tremble.

When I first saw the sexton he was standing motionless behind a stone. Presently he moved on again, pausing at times, and turning right and left with that nervous, jerky motion that always chills me.

His path lay across the blighted moss and withered leaves scattered in moist layers along the bank of the little brown stream, and I, wondering what his errand might be, followed, passing silently over the rotting forest mould. Once or twice he heard me, for I saw him stop short, a blot of black and orange in the sombre woods; but he always started on again, hurrying at times as though the dead might grow impatient.

For the sexton that I followed through the November forest was one of those small creatures that God has sent to bury little things that die alone in the world. Undertaker, sexton, mute, and gravedigger in one, this thing, robed in black and orange, buries all things that die unheeded by the world. And so they call it—this little beetle in black and orange—the “sexton.”

How he hurried! I looked up into the gray sky where ashen branches, interlaced, swayed in unfelt winds, and I heard the dry leaves rattle in the tree tops, and the thud of acorns on the mould. A sombre bird peered at me from a heap of brush, then ran partering over the leaves.

The sexton had reached a bit of broken ground, and was scuffling over sticks and gulleys toward a brown tuft of withered grass above. I dared not help him; besides, I could not bring myself to touch him, he was so horribly absorbed in his errand.

I halted for a moment. The eagerness of this live creature to find his dead and handle it; the odour of death and decay in this little forest world, where I had waited for spring when Lys moved among the flowering gorse, singing like a throstle in the wind—all this troubled me, and I lagged behind.

The sexton scrambled over the dead grass, raising his seared eyes at every wave of wind. The wind brought sadness with it, the scent of lifeless trees, the vague rustle of gorse buds, yellow and dry as paper flowers.

Along the stream, rotting water plants, scorched and frost-blighted, lay massed above the mud. I saw their pallid stems swaying like worms in the listless current.

The sexton had reached a mouldering stump, and now he seemed undecided. I sat down on a fallen tree, moist and bleached, that crumbled under my touch, leaving a stale odour in the air. Overhead a crow rose heavily and flapped out into the moorland; the wind rattled the stark black-thorns; a single drop of rain touched my cheek. I looked into the stream for some sign of life; there was nothing, except a shapeless creature that might have been a blindworm, lying belly upward on the mud bottom. I touched it with a stick. It was stiff and dead.

The wind among the sham paperlike gorse buds filled the woods with a silken rustle. I put out my hand and touched a yellow blossom; it felt like an immortelle on a funeral pillow.

The sexton had moved on again; something, perhaps a musty spider's web, had stuck to one leg, and he dragged it as he laboured on through the wood. Some little field mouse torn by weasel or kestrel, some crushed mole, some tiny dead pile of fur or feather, lay not far off, stricken by God or man or brother creature. And the sexton knew it—how, God knows! But he knew it, and hurried on to his tryst with the dead.

His path now lay along the edge of a tidal inlet from the Groix River. I looked down at the gray water through the leafless branches, and I saw a small snake, head raised, swim from a submerged clot of weeds into the shadow of a rock. There was a curlew, too, somewhere in the black swamp, whose dreary, persistent call cursed the silence.

I wondered when the sexton would fly; for he could fly if he chose; it is only when the dead are near, very near, that he creeps. The soiled mess of cobweb still stuck to him, and his progress was impeded by it. Once I saw a small brown and white spider, striped like a zebra, running swiftly in his tracks, but the sexton turned and raised his two clubbed forelegs in a horrid imploring attitude that still had something of menace under it. The spider backed away and sidled under a stone.

When anything that is dying—sick and close to death—falls upon the face of the earth, something moves in the blue above, floating like a moat; then another, then others. These specks that grow out of the fathomless azure vault are jewelled flies. They come to wait for Death.

The sexton also arranges rendezvous with Death, but never waits; Death must arrive the first.

When the heavy clover is ablaze with painted wings, when bees hum and blunder among the white-thorn, or pass by like swift singing bullets, the sexton snaps open his black and orange wings and hums across the clover with the bees. Death in a scented garden, the tokens of the plague on a fair young breast, the gray flag of fear in the face of one who reels into the arms of Destruction, the sexton scrambling in the lap of spring, folding his sleek wings, unfolding them to ape the buzz of bees, passing over sweet clover tops to the putrid flesh that summons him—these things must be and will be to the end.

The sexton was running now—running fast, trailing the cobweb over twigs and mud. The edge of the wood was near, for I could see the winter wheat, like green scenery in a theatre, stretching for miles across the cliffs, crude as painted grass. And as I crept through the brittle forest fringe, I saw a figure lying face downward in the wheat—a girl's slender form, limp, motionless.

The sexton darted under her breast.

Then I threw myself down beside her, crying, "Lys! Lys!" And as I cried, the icy rain burst out across the moors, and the trees dashed their stark limbs together till the whole spectral forest tossed and danced, and the wind roared among the cliffs.

And through the Dance of Death Lys trembled in my arms, and sobbed and clung to me, murmuring that the Purple Emperor was dead; but the wind tore the words from her white lips, and flung them out across the sea, where the winter lightning lashed the stark heights of Groix.

Then the fear of death was stilled in my soul, and I raised her from the ground, holding her close.

And I saw the sexton, just beyond us, hurry across the ground and seek shelter under a little dead skylark, stiff-winged, muddy, lying alone in the rain.

In the storm, above us, a bird hovered singing through the rain. It passed us twice, still singing, and as it passed again we saw the shadow it cast upon the world was whiter than snow.