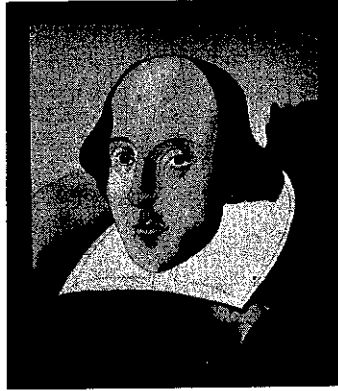


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Hamlet

It happened in Denmark, long ago. High up on the battlements of the castle at Elsinore, two sentinels, their cloaks snapping in the whipping dark, met at the limit of their watch: the one ending, the other beginning. Their faces, seen faintly by the light of a thin seeding of stars, were white as bone. It was midnight. Presently they were joined by two companions, and the relieved sentinel took his departure, very gladly. The three remaining stared uneasily about them.

"What, has this thing appeared again tonight?" asked one of the newcomers, a young man by name of Horatio.

"I have seen nothing," answered the sentinel, but softly and with many a wary look about him.

For two nights now the sentinels had seen a strange, unnatural sight. Between midnight and one o'clock, a phantom figure had soundlessly stalked the battlements. It had been, so far as could be made out in the shaking dark, the spirit of the dead King.

"Tush, tush, 'twill not appear," murmured Horatio. He was a visitor to Elsinore from Wittenburg, where he had been at the University with Prince Hamlet, the dead King's son. Being a student of philosophy and not much given to dreaming, he had little faith in ghosts, phantoms and spectres of the night. He smiled at his pale companions, who had dragged

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him up to this cold, dark, windy place with their fantastic tale of—
“Look where it comes again!”

He looked; and his sensible eyes started from his sensible head. All reason fled for in weirdly gleaming armour and with weightless tread, the dead King stalked slowly by! The watchers, huddled in their cloaks, trembled with amazement and dread.

“Speak to it, Horatio!” breathed one, for the apparition seemed to linger. Horatio made the attempt, as boldly as he was able; and the night seemed to freeze as the dead King turned upon them a shadowy countenance that was grim with grief. Then it stalked away, and vanished into some invisible curtain of the night.



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They watched after it till their eyes ached with staring; then they turned to one another in bewilderment. What could be the meaning of the apparition? Why had the dead King returned, and with looks so heavy with despair? Horatio, a little recovered in voice and colour, supposed the cause to lie in some danger to the state. Fortinbras, the Prince of Norway, was arming to seize back the lands that the dead King had boldly conquered. Surely it was this threat that had troubled the King's spirit and had dragged it from the grave?

But even as he proposed such a cause, which seemed likely enough, the ghost returned, as if to deny it.

"Stay!" cried Horatio, "if thou hast any sound or use of voice, speak to me!"

But it would not. It raised its arms as if in horror. From far off, a cock crew. The phantom wavered, became insubstantial, then faded, leaving on the dark air no more than an impress of measureless grief and despair.

"It was about to speak when the cock crew," whispered one.

"And then it started like a guilty thing upon a fearful summons," said Horatio; and straightway it was agreed that Prince Hamlet should be told of what had been seen. If to no one else, the dead father would surely speak to his living son.

The King, the great, good King, loved and honoured by all, had been dead for two months. He had been stung by a serpent while sleeping in his orchard, and all Denmark had wept. But now the time for grieving was past: sad eyes gave way to merry ones, long faces to round smiles; and the heavy black of mourning, that had bandaged up the court, was washed away by a sea of bright colour. Yellow silks and sky-blue satins, encrusted with silver, blazed in the ceremonial chamber, and the walls were hung with glory. There was a new King—even though there was still the same Queen. She had married again, and with her dead husband's brother.

This new King was a sturdy gentleman, broad-shouldered and broad-featured, and much given to smiling—as well he might, for he had gained a luxurious throne and a luxurious queen at a stroke. Affably he conducted the affairs of state, dispatching ambassadors to Norway to

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patch up grievances and giving gracious permission to Laertes, his faithful chamberlain's son, to return to France whence he'd come to attend the coronation. Next, still smiling, and with his strong hand guarding the jewelled hand of his Queen, he turned to her son, Prince Hamlet, a young man in black, like a plain thought in a gaudy world.

"But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son—"

"A little more than kin, and less than kind," murmured the Prince, with a look of dislike and contempt.

Anxiously the Queen, his mother, begged him to forsake his dark looks and dark attire. He answered her with scarcely more courtesy than he had shown the King. The King, hiding his annoyance, added his own urgings; and the young man submitted—to the extent of agreeing to remain at court and not return to school at Wittenberg as he had wished. The King was satisfied and, with more smiles (which he dispensed like the small coin of royal charity), he left the chamber with the backward-glancing Queen upon his arm. As if on apron-strings, the crowding courtiers followed.

Hamlet was alone. Long and hard he stared after the departed court. The look upon his face, had it been seen by the royal pair who had inspired it, would have chilled their hearts, made stone of their smiles, and poison of the lust of their bed. Dull hatred oppressed the young man's mind: hatred for the corrupted world in which he was imprisoned, hatred for life itself, and loathing and disgust for the Queen, his mother, who, so soon after her noble husband's death, had married so wretched a creature as the dead King's brother.

"O most wicked speed!" he cried out in anguish, as, helplessly, his imagination both probed and shrank from the hateful circumstance. "To post with such dexterity to incestuous sheets!"

But someone was coming! Hastily he hid all evidence of his breaking heart under his customary mask of indifferent courtesy.

"Hail to your lordship," a gentleman said, coming into the chamber.

"I am glad to see you well," responded Hamlet, scarcely looking up, and with the distant cousin of a smile. Then he saw that the gentleman was no tedious courtier. It was Horatio, his old school friend Horatio, from Wittenberg!

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At once, surprise and delight overspread his countenance. His gloom vanished and his sunk spirit revived. In a moment he was all quickness and liveliness and eager hospitality, as he greeted his good friend from Wittenberg, where life had been clear and honest, where the plain rooms had been enriched with noble ideas, not sullen tapestries, and the talk had flowed like wine. Warmly he included in his greeting Horatio's two companions, who were soldiers of the Royal Guard. Then, turning to his friend, he inquired:

"But what is your affair in Elsinore?"

"My lord, I came to see your father's funeral."

"I prithee, do not mock me, fellow student," said Hamlet, his smile, like the sun in winter, forgetting its warmth. "I think it was to see my mother's wedding."

"Indeed, my lord," admitted Horatio, gently, "it followed hard upon."

"Thrift, thrift, Horatio. The funeral baked meats did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables," said Hamlet. Then his bitter mood lightened and his smile regained some warmth. "My father," he murmured softly, "methinks I see my father—"

Horatio and his companions started. "Where, my lord?"

"In my mind's eye, Horatio," said Hamlet; and his listeners grew easy again.

"I saw him once," said Horatio. "'A was a goodly king."

"'A was a man," said Hamlet, as if wanting to dispense with all worldly distinction of office. "Take him for all in all: I shall not look upon his like again."

Then Horatio told him. Eagerly, and yet careful to keep within the exact observation of a scholar, he told of the appearance of the dead King upon the battlements. "I knew your father," he assured the Prince. "These hands are not more like."

Hamlet listened, with fiercely beating heart; but old Wittenberg habits of argument, question and debate made him cautious.

"Armed, say you?"

"Armed, my lord."

"From top to toe?"

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"My lord, from head to foot."

"Then saw you not his face?" demanded Hamlet, triumphantly.

"O yes, my lord, he wore his beaver up."

There was no doubt. The spirit had been, to all intents, the ghost of Hamlet's father. With huge and dreadful excitement, Hamlet promised that he would join Horatio and the soldiers on the battlements on the following night.

"My father's spirit—in arms," he breathed, when he was alone. "All is not well . . ."

Laertes was for France. Handsomely dressed in the newest fashion for his journey, he came to bid farewell to his sister Ophelia and give her such advice upon the perils and pitfalls of the world as he thought to be necessary. She was young and fair and modest as a bud. She was of so yielding a nature that she dared not call her soul her own, and had put it, trustingly, in the care of her brother and her wise old father, Polonius, the chamberlain. She had confided in Laertes that Prince Hamlet had, of late, caused her to believe that he loved her; and now, as she sat in a window seat, stitching some nursery proverb into a sampler, she listened as her brother solemnly warned her of the danger of passion and the unsteady nature of a young man's love. She nodded and nodded, and, when he had finished, she looked up and expressed the timid hope that he would practise as he had preached. Indignantly he protested his own virtue, and was about to depart when his father, Polonius, appeared.

"Yet here, Laertes? Aboard, aboard for shame!" cried the old gentleman; and then, taking advantage of the moment, saw fit to advise his son, even as his son had advised his sister. But yet there was a difference; for while Laertes had warned his sister of dangers that might threaten her from without, Polonius warned of those subtler dangers from within. Although they were, for the most part, threadbare maxims such as Ophelia might have embroidered on her samplers, they were not unfitting.

"Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy," said Polonius, severely eyeing his over-dressed son, "but not expressed in fancy: rich, not gaudy . . ."

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At the mention of "purse", the young man's hand had gone helplessly to his side, which caused Polonius to warn, "Neither a borrower nor a lender be . . ." The young man grew red; but, nevertheless, listened patiently until his father had done. Then, turning to his sister and reminding her of his own advice, he took his departure in a blaze of mostly good intentions.

"What is't, Ophelia, he hath said to you?" asked her father suspiciously.

Timidly Ophelia confessed that it had to do with the Lord Hamlet. The old man nodded; he had suspected as much.

"What is between you?" he demanded. "Give me up the truth."

"He hath, my lord, of late," murmured the girl, dividing her looks between her proverb and her father, "made many tenders of his affection to me."

"Affection!" exclaimed Polonius contemptuously. "Pooh, you speak like a green girl!" And then and there he berated her soundly for her foolishness in believing in a prince's love. He warned her (as her brother had done) of the danger that might lie in Hamlet's fondness—a danger not only to herself, but, more importantly, to that wily politician who was her father. Sternly he forbade her to have any further talk with Prince Hamlet; and she, mild Ophelia, who had already given up the charge of her soul, now gave up the charge of her heart. "I shall obey, my lord," she said.

The night was bitter and the frozen stars peered secretly down upon the three cloaked figures who stood upon the castle's battlements.

"What hour now?" asked Hamlet for perhaps the hundredth time.

"I think it lacks of twelve," answered Horatio.

If the dead King was to appear, his time was almost come. Suddenly there came the sound of festive trumpets and the double thunder of a cannon.

"What does this mean, my lord?" wondered Horatio.

It was a custom, expounded Hamlet, with a sour smile, for such uproarious noise to accompany the revelry and drinking of the King. It brought the nation into disrepute, and made them seem to be no more

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than idle drunkards, so that, whatever of good there was, was lost in bad report. From this, Hamlet's unresting mind hovered over the curious circumstances of how a single defect in a man might, in the general view, taint and discolour his fairest virtues.

"Look, my lord, it comes!" Horatio's voice was sharp with fear; his hand shook as he pointed.

Hamlet turned. His face grew pale, his eyes huge, and his expelled breath made a thread of grey amazement in the air.

"Angels and ministers of grace defend us!" he cried out.

Upon the dark battlements stood his dead father! All in armour, as cold and lifeless as himself, the dead King gazed with tragic sorrow upon his shaking son. He beckoned, and Hamlet made to follow. Urgently his companions—Horatio and the sentinel—tried to prevent him, for they dreaded that the spirit might be malevolent and would tempt the young Prince to his death. Savagely Hamlet threw off the restraint and threatened to strike with his sword if he should be hindered any more.

"Go on," he cried to the beckoning ghost, "I'll follow thee!"

The dead King stalked on and the wild Prince went after, till both were lost from sight.

"Let's follow!" urged the sentinel, fearful for his Prince.

"To what issue will this come?" whispered Horatio.

The sentinel stared into the freezing darkness in which the dead King and his son had vanished. "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark," he said.

Father and son stood close together in a secret fold of the night. The young man shuddered as the unnatural chill of his dead father struck through to his heart.

"Mark me," whispered the ghost.

"I will," breathed his son.

"My hour is almost come," sighed the spirit; and, as it told of the grim and hateful regions to which it was soon condemned to return, Hamlet stared into his father's shadowy, unhappy eyes and longed, with all his heart, to kiss his freezing hand and pour out, into his hollow ear, all the love and devotion that death had stopped.

"List, list, O list!" begged the ghost, with sudden urgency. "If thou didst ever thy dear father love—"

"O God!"

"Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder!"

"Murder!"

The stars glared, the battlements shuddered, and Hamlet's heart ceased as the terrible word was uttered. Murder! And revenge!

"Now, Hamlet, hear," whispered the ghost. "The serpent that did sting thy father's life now wears his crown!"

"O my prophetic soul! My uncle!"

Sombrely the dead man observed and approved the quickening of anger in his son, and went on to unfold the hideous circumstance of the crime, of how the King's loving wife, Hamlet's mother, had been seduced by the King's wretched brother, and then, how that brother had poured poison in the sleeping King's ear.

"Thus was I, sleeping, by a brother's hand, of life, of crown, of queen at once dispatch'd . . ."

Consumed with rage and horror, the son listened to his father's words, each one of which seemed a command for revenge upon the unwholesome pair whose faint rejoicings, from time to time, mocked the night.

"But howsoever thou pursuest this act," warned the ghost, with a sudden tenderness made horrible by its hopelessness, "taint not thy mind nor let thy soul contrive against thy mother aught. Leave her to heaven . . ."

Hamlet's heart ached with pity, for he saw that his father's spirit was tormented by love no less than by hate: both had outlived the grave. But now the night was wearing threadbare, and the phantom shivered as the dark grew thin and patched. "Fare thee well," it whispered. "Adieu, adieu, adieu. Remember me." Then it was gone and Hamlet stood alone.

Breathing harshly he leaned against the battlements and rested his head upon the cold stone, as if to support his staggering mind. Far, far below, a wild sea crashed and raged against the rocks at the base of the cliff upon which the castle stood; but darkness and disturbance reduced its fury to silent, tumbled lace. Yet had it been seen in all its huge madness, it would have seemed no more than distance had made it beside the raging in

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Hamlet's soul. He raised his head and, with eyes blazing with tears, swore to heaven that he would be the instrument of the ghost's revenge. He would wipe from his mind all the calmness, wisdom and fine thoughts he had learned in happy Wittenberg, and leave behind only—revenge!

"O most pernicious woman!" he wept, as again he heard sounds of distant revelry. "O villain, villain, smiling damned villain!" With trembling hands he drew a book from his pocket—a student's book in which observations of life and nature were noted down. "Meet it is I set it down," he muttered, as if to calm his extreme agitation by such scholar's habit, "that one may smile, and smile, and be a villain." He wrote so fiercely that he scored the paper through. He put the book away. "It is 'Adieu, adieu, remember me'," he repeated. "I have sworn't!" He drew his sword as if meaning, then and there, to rush down into the black castle and kill its poisoned heart.

But he heard voices calling. His companions were searching for him. Desperately he searched for some secret place in his mind where he might hide the dreadful knowledge he possessed; he would not, he dared not, confide what the ghost had revealed. When his companions found him, and eagerly questioned him, he answered them with wild, fantastic humour which, to his great relief, bewildered them into asking no more. Nonetheless he made them swear, upon the cross of his sword, that they would never tell of what had happened that night. This they did, and more than once; for wherever they stood, Hamlet heard the ghost, deep in the earth, calling: "Swear!"

"This is wondrous strange," said Horatio, troubled by his friend's frantic manner.

"And therefore as a stranger give it welcome," returned Hamlet; and then, with a sad smile at his old school friend, said: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

He made them swear again, this time that, if his mad humour should continue, they would never betray that they suspected what lay behind it. He trusted no one, least of all himself. His heart was so full that he dared not trust his tongue not to betray him. Madness would be his

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refuge and hiding place of truth, until the time was ripe for his revenge.

Revenge! He shrank within himself as the full horror of his circumstance came upon him. What was he, Horatio's fellow student, doing in this dark world of murder and revenge, of treacherous kings and faithless queens, of creeping courtiers and poison? Most bitterly he sighed:

"The time is out of joint. O cursed spite, that ever I was born to set it right."

Laertes was in France and out of his father's sight, but by no means out of that cautious old gentleman's mind. Polonius did not trust his son; and perhaps not without cause. He sent a servant to spy on him and on what company he kept.

Polonius, cunning old adviser to king after king, deemed it his duty to know everything. Consequently if walls had ears, they were Polonius's; if keyholes had eyes, they were likewise, Polonius's. Yet this abundance of knowledge did not make him wise; it made him merely knowing. Thus when his daughter Ophelia came to him, as she was in duty bound, and told him that the Lord Hamlet had appeared in her room while she was sewing, with the looks of a melancholy madman, he sought no further for a cause than in disappointed love. "Have you given him any hard words of late?" he asked.

"No, my good lord," she answered, with a downcast look, "but as you did command, I did repel his letters and denied his access to me."

"That hath made him mad," pronounced Polonius. "Come, go we to the King. This must be known . . ."

But Hamlet's strangeness had already troubled the smooth surface of the court, puzzled the smiling King and vaguely distressed the easy Queen. Knowing that nothing would be got from the loyal Horatio, two other school friends of Hamlet had been sent for, in the hope that they would discover the cause of the Prince's change. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two courtly scholars, so alike in bows and smiles and flattered pleasure at being Royally summoned, that the King was hard put to know which was Guildenstern and which was Rosencrantz. However, the two fledgling courtiers had no such difficulty in knowing the King, and divining, amid the oiled smiles that slipped from face to

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face, that they would be well paid for spying on their old friend and smelling out the secrets of his heart.

"Heavens make our presence and our practices pleasant and helpful to him," said Guildenstern to Hamlet's mother, judging that such tender interest would concern her more than it would the King.

But it would seem that the young men's skills were not to be needed. No sooner had the bowing pair departed, to search out Hamlet, than Polonius came bustling in, stuffed with good news. First, from Norway. Young Fortinbras asked for no more than the free passage of his army through Denmark to some distant spot. Next, and best of all, the cause of Hamlet's madness had been discovered. Polonius had found it out. What was it? The King and Queen waited while the old politician, who could never be plain, used up words like stuffing, to swell the importance of a small goose before serving it up.

"More matter with less art," said the Queen impatiently and Polonius, thus brought, unwillingly, to the point, produced a letter written by Hamlet to Ophelia. It was a love letter of the most sentimental kind.

"Came this from Hamlet to her?" wondered the Queen, as if surprised that her son could pen such poor stuff.

It had indeed.

"But how hath she received his love?" asked the King, curiously.

Polonius, uninterested in his daughter's heart, replied by explaining that he had thought it fitting to put a stop to the business. "Lord Hamlet," he had warned his daughter, "is a prince out of thy star. This must not be." Very properly he had forbidden her to speak with the Prince again. But since then he had learned of such matters from his daughter as had left him in no doubt as to what had staggered the young man's brain. Unrequited love.

"Do you think 'tis this?" asked the King of Hamlet's mother.

"It may be," sighed the Queen, over whose own heart love, passion and lust exercised a sovereign sway. "Very like."

But the King was not entirely convinced. He would like more evidence.

"How may we try it further?" he asked.

To Polonius, the ever-resourceful Polonius, this presented not the

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smallest difficulty. Hamlet, he recollected, was accustomed to walk in the lobby for hours at a time. "At such a time," he proposed, with the heartless eagerness of the seasoned conspirator, "I'll loose my daughter to him." What passed then between the girl and the Prince might easily be overheard from a suitable place of concealment. (Such places were, to Polonius, as familiar as his study; and, doubtless, furnished with comfortable chairs). Readily the King fell in with the scheme, but further talk was prevented by the appearance of Hamlet himself. He was reading a book; and so deeply was he sunk in it that he might have been walking upon some lonely heath, instead of through the richly peopled rooms of the royal palace of Denmark. In appearance, Hamlet was somewhat declined. His shoes were unfastened, his stockings wrinkled, and his shir hanging loose, like a limp surrender. Polonius nodded knowingly. He urged the King and Queen to depart and leave all to him, which they did most gladly. Hamlet seemed not to see them go.

"How does my good Lord Hamlet?" inquired Polonius, with the patient kindness that might be offered to an idiot or a child.

"Well, God a-mercy," returned the Prince, not looking up.

"Do you know me, my lord?" pursued Polonius.

The Prince looked at him carefully. "Excellent well," he said. "You are a fishmonger."



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Somewhat taken aback, Polonius denied the charge, and then found himself caught in a swirling net of nonsense, of daughters, maggots and graves, from which he was glad to escape, when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, out of breath from searching, at last found their friend.

"My excellent good friends!" cried Hamlet, throwing off all his madness and most of his melancholy in a moment. "Good lads, how do you both?"

They laughed, and he laughed; and, for a little while, they were no more than three good friends delighting in each other's shrewd wit and wisdom; and, for a little while, the grim horror and despair of Hamlet's situation seemed to him to be no more than an evil dream . . . until, in all innocence and courtesy, he asked:

"But in the beaten way of friendship, what make you at Elsinore?"

"To visit you, my lord," they answered promptly, "no other occasion."

A little too prompt; and accompanied by looks that were a little too innocent. In moments, they who had been commissioned to worm out Hamlet's secret, had their own uncovered before they had so much as begun. They were forced to admit that they had been sent for by the Queen and King; and it needed no great skill on Hamlet's part to guess the reason. Bitterly he stared at them and reflected on how easily they had been corrupted by the poisoned world of the court. Anxiously they tried to make amends and lift the Prince's spirits. They told him that they had passed on their way to the castle a company of actors who were coming to perform before the court. It was, it seemed, a company from the city that the Prince knew well.

In spite of himself, the Prince smiled. He delighted in the play and the company of players, those excellent fellow creatures whose highest aim was to please, seemed to him the best in the world. He looked forward keenly to their arrival; but then, remembering the two pupil-spies who stood anxiously by him, he felt a pang of pity. "You are welcome," he said. "But my uncle-father and my aunt-mother are deceived."

"In what, my dear lord?" asked Guildenstern, hopefully.

"I am but mad north-north-west," said Hamlet seriously. "When the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw."

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Before they could unravel Hamlet's meaning—if, indeed, there was any—Polonius entered with the news that the players had arrived.

"The best actors in the world," read out Polonius, from the company's extensive advertisement, which reached down, like a paper apron, almost to his knees, "either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral . . ." he drew breath and read on, until the players themselves appeared.

They came into the grand ceremonial chamber where real kings and real queens and real princes held sway, and were not in the least abashed. They wore their paper crowns, clutched their wooden swords, and shrugged their patchwork gowns with a dusty dignity and a seasoning of pride.

"You are welcome, masters!" cried Hamlet, and shook them all warmly by the hand. He looked fondly into each well-remembered face, commented ruefully upon the damage done by years, then begged the chief actor to recite, then and there, a certain speech for which he had a particular affection.

The actor, a grand figure of a man, with the nose and eye of a battered eagle, recollected the speech and straightway launched it, as gloriously as a galleon, its sails full of wind. Either by chance, or design, the speech was from a tale of old Troy, and was full of murdered kings, revenge and mourning queens. Absorbed, Hamlet listened.

"Look," exclaimed Polonius admiringly, when the actor paused, "whe'er he has not turned his colour and has tears in's eyes. Prithee no more."

The players, pleased with the reception of this modest sample of their art, were preparing to be hustled away by Polonius to their quarters, when Hamlet detained their principal.

"Can you play 'The Murder of Gonzago'?" he asked quietly, for a curious idea was fermenting in his mind. The actor nodded. "We'll ha't tomorrow night," murmured Hamlet. "You could for a need study a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines, which I would set down and insert in't, could you not?"

The player, familiar with the vanity of poet-princes, agreed; then

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followed the busy chamberlain. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern likewise, bowed themselves away, doubtless to report to the King. Only Hamlet remained.

The Greek Prince, of whom the player had so roaringly told, had killed a king as bloodily quick as sword could strike; but the damned King of Denmark still lived. The Trojan Queen had rent her garments and shrieked aloud to heaven when she had seen her husband dead; but the Queen of Denmark still sighed and smiled in the bed of her husband's murderer. The player who had presented the scene had wept real tears over those long-dead griefs; the Prince of Denmark, with father murdered, mother lost to shame, and himself urged, by his father's ghost, to revenge, did nothing. "Bloody, bawdy villain!" he cried out, as his uncle's smiling face forced itself before his mind's eye. "Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!" He stormed and waved his arms, even as the player had done; then shook his head. Ranting words were not to the purpose. Better think carefully of the speech he would write for tomorrow night's play. He nodded grimly. It was in his mind that the speech and the play together would represent, as nearly as was possible, the exact circumstance of his father's murder. His uncle, watching it, could not fail to be struck to the soul, and betray his guilt to the world. That is, if he *was* guilty. Hamlet frowned. Though the ghost's accusation had been, at the time, terrible in its certainty, now, in the light of a later day, it seemed remote, doubtful, and even fantastic. "I'll have grounds more relative than this," decided the undecided Prince. "The play's the thing, wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King!"

Ophelia, in her best and most delicate attire, sweetly perfumed and with sufficient red in her cheeks to sharpen her natural modesty, waited meekly while her father, closely huddled with the King and Queen, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, murmured about the Lord Hamlet. They were gathered in the lobby where, daily, Hamlet walked; and where she, as her father had expressed it, was to be loosed to the Prince. Presently the two young men took their bowing departures, and the Queen, after speaking kindly to Ophelia, also went away.

"Ophelia, walk you here," said her father, taking her firmly by the

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arm and examining her critically as if to see if anything further might be done by way of improvement. He was anxious to be proven right in his judgement that the Prince's madness had been brought on by love for his daughter. He pressed a book into her hands and bade her read it so that her solitary walking should seem plausible. Then he and the King secreted themselves in a curtained alcove that might have been expressly made to hide such a King and such an adviser. The girl looked unhappily towards the curtain. Angrily Polonius gestured her away. The Prince was approaching. Ophelia, divided between obedience to her father, and shame for the part she had been told to play, opened her book, and shrank into the furthest obscurity she could find.



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The Prince also was reading; but there was a deeper likeness between Hamlet and Ophelia than such outward show. Each had been commanded by a father, one living, one dead, to play a part for which nature had not fashioned them: Ophelia for deceit, and Hamlet for murderous revenge. In order to overcome his nature and keep his anger hot, he had returned to the book in which he had so fiercely scored his fury while the ghost's words still sounded in his ears and tore at his heart. But no such tempest tossed him now.

"To be, or not to be, that is the question:" he mused; for he had, in turning the pages, come upon the notes he had made of a great debate at Wittenberg, in which the old question had been closely argued, of whether it was better to live or to die. The arguments were strong upon both sides. Indeed, for a time, it seemed that he who argued for death had the stronger case, as he piled up, in a grim edifice, all the agonies of living that might, by the single stroke of death, be utterly demolished. And yet, as his opponent shrewdly pointed out, the death-lover, in spite of all his excellent reasons, still lived. Why did he shrink from the one act that would, by his own admission end his sufferings? The answer, as Hamlet gave it murmured utterance, was as sombre as the question. "The dread of something after death, the undiscovered country, from whose bourn no traveller returns, puzzles the will, and makes us rather bear those ills we have than fly to others that we know not of."

He shut the book and helplessly considered how closely the swaying of the argument reflected the swaying of his mind. He longed for death, which would have absolved him from the hideous duty that had been laid upon him; but he dared not rush into it. Self-murder was as repugnant to him as the murder of another. "Thus conscience doth make cowards of us all," he sighed bitterly, "and thus the native hue of resolution is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought . . ."

A flicker of silk and the movement of a pale hand caught the corner of his eye. He looked round and saw Ophelia. Gently she greeted him. Gently he responded. Timidly she approached him and held out a little box of trinkets he had given her. She wanted to return them. He denied all knowledge of them. Bewildered, she protested; and then came out with such a sentiment as might well have been stitched on one of her

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samplers: "For to the noble mind rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind."

Hamlet laughed, somewhat harshly. He did indeed love Ophelia, but for her dear soul and not for her unformed mind. In her stiff words he smelt out the instruction of her pompous meddling father; and he became very angry. Even she, even the lovely, simple Ophelia, was being poisoned by the general poison of the court. Savagely he turned upon her and lacerated her with the insensate fury of his tongue—even though he knew full well that no fault attached to her. But he knew that whatever he said would pass directly to her father, who was an ever-open channel to the King.

"I did love you once," he said abruptly.

"Indeed, my lord, you made me believe so," faltered the girl.

"You should not have believed me," dismissed the Prince, hiding his pain under contempt. "I loved you not."

"I was the more deceived," whispered Ophelia, not knowing whether she was on her head or heels.

"Get thee to a nunnery!" shouted Hamlet wildly. Yet at the same time, he ached with pity and remorse for the frightened girl. But Ophelia could never walk the bloody path of revenge to which he was condemned. He wished only for her to escape from the foul corruption of Elsinore. "Where's your father?" he demanded suddenly.

"At home, my lord," lied Ophelia, horribly confused. And yet it was no lie she told, for Polonius's home was wherever he might hide and overhear. Nonetheless she grew pale, fearing that Hamlet had spied her father spying.

"I have heard of your paintings well enough," jeered Hamlet, seeing false colour, like treacherous flags, thrown up in her vacant cheeks. "God hath given you one face and you make yourselves another . . . Go to, I'll no more on't, it hath made me mad. I say we will have no more marriage. Those that are married already—all but one—shall live. The rest shall keep as they are. To a nunnery, go!"

With that, the mad Prince fled, leaving the girl he loved amazed and weeping on her knees. A moment later, the King and Polonius crept out of their concealment.

SHAKESPEARE STORIES

"Love?" said the King, his broad face bereft of smiles. "His affections do not that way tend, nor what he spake, though it lacked form a little, was not like madness. There's something in his soul . . ."

Polonius agreed, for he was not the man to disagree with his king; but he still maintained that neglected love had been the cause. "How, now, Ophelia?" he said impatiently, as his daughter's sobbing distracted him. "You need not tell us what Lord Hamlet said, we heard it all." Then, continuing to the King, proposed that the Queen might be better able to worm out her son's secret. If such a circumstance could be arranged, he, Polonius, (needless to say), would be concealed and hear all.

"It shall be so," nodded the King. "Madness in great ones must not unwatched go."

Hamlet, his face pale and his eyes glittering with excitement, waited in the great hall where the play was to be performed. Horatio was with him. Horatio knew all. Together they were to watch the King to see if he betrayed his guilt as the play unfolded the crime.

"They are coming to the play!" cried Hamlet, as the customary trumpets and drums sounded the approach of the King. "I must be idle. Get you a place!"

There was a buzzing and murmuring and laughing, and rustling and shuffling, as the King and Queen and courtly audience came in and flowed, like a silken sea, over the gilded chairs and stools and cushions that had been made ready.

"Come hither, my dear Hamlet," invited the Queen, a treasure store of pearls and diamonds and brilliant smiles, "sit by me."

Curtly the Prince declined. He took his place by Ophelia, whose brightest jewels were her eyes. But his preference seemed more spiteful than fond. He taunted her with lewd remarks that made her blush with misery, until the players' trumpet sounded the beginning of the play. The audience grew quiet, leaned forward, and misted over into a single monster of many mouths and eyes. All watched the stage—save Hamlet and Horatio, who watched the King.

At first, there was a dumb show. Gaudy painted figures stalked stiffly to and fro, and enacted, wordlessly, what might, or might not have been,

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the tale of a royal poisoning. The Player King grimaced, clutched air, and perished in dire agony. The King of Denmark's smile seemed nailed to his face. The dumb show ended to applause like a thin shower of hail. The dead king revived, bowed, and begged all to attend to what should follow.

"Is this a prologue, or the posy of a ring?" demanded Hamlet, consumed with impatience.

"'Tis brief, my lord," murmured Ophelia.

"As woman's love," said Hamlet, with a sharp, accusing look at the Queen.

Now the play began in earnest; and, though the king wore a tinsel crown, and the queen was no better than a padded boy, they spoke their love so eloquently that the Queen of Denmark sighed. But the King of Denmark's smile still seemed nailed to his face.

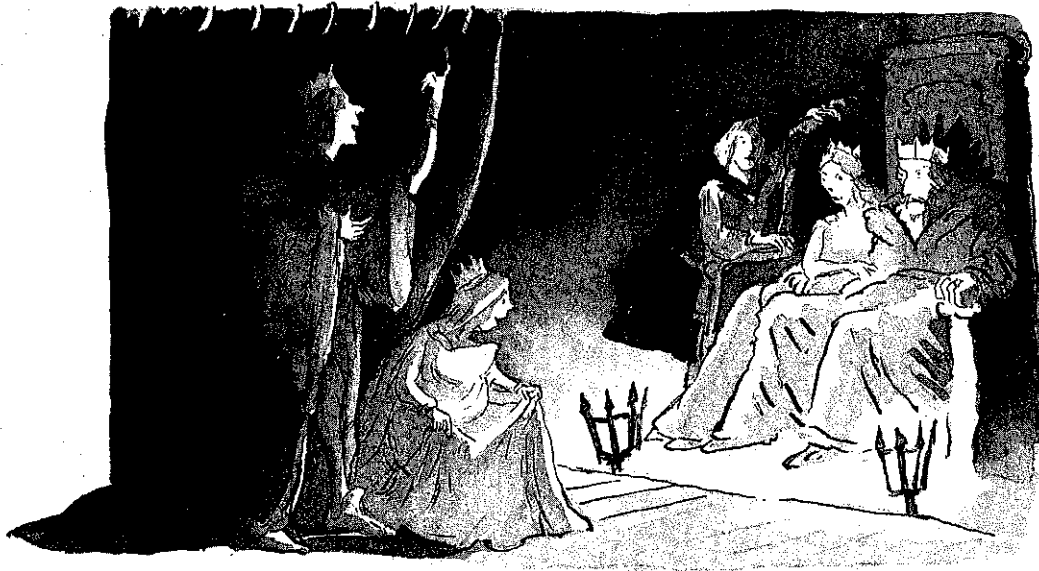
"Madam how like you this play?" asked Hamlet.

"Have you heard the argument?" demanded the King. "Is there no offence in't?"

"No, no, they do but jest—poison in jest. No offence i' the world."

"What do you call the play?"

"The Mousetrap."



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The play continued. The Player King lay sleeping on the boards. A murderer entered. "Thoughts black, hands apt, drugs fit, and time agreeing," he hissed; and crept towards the sleeper with black cloak trailing, like some malignant bat. He drew out a phial, unstopped it and, with horrid smile, poured its deadly contents into his victim's ear. The King of Denmark's smile was gone!

"A poisons him i' the garden for his estate!" cried Hamlet, unable to contain his fierce joy. "The story is extant and written in very choice Italian. You shall see anon how the murderer gets the love of Gonzago's wife—"

The King of Denmark stood up. His eyes were blazing with anger. His face was grey with guilt.

"Give o'er the play!" cried Polonius, urgently.

"Give me some light!" shouted the enraged King. "Away!"

The play was cut off, ended before its ending. The audience had gone. Tumbled stools and chairs bore testimony to the haste of the departure. The bewildered Player King crept back to recover his tinsel crown. Then he went away, sadly shaking his head. The performance had not gone well.

But to Hamlet and Horatio the play had succeeded beyond all expectation. The King was guilty; the ghost had been honest. A furious excitement filled the Prince. He had at last set events into motion. Action had begun! His mood found expression in wild laughter and wild words, as if he had drunk strong wine. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, pale with uneasiness, came to tell him that the King's rage had worsened. Hamlet was not distressed. The Queen, also, was much agitated.

"She desires to speak with you in her closet before you go to bed," said Rosencrantz, reproachfully.

"We shall obey," announced Hamlet, "were she ten times our mother."

Now came Polonius, limp with concern, and with the self-same message from the Queen. She would speak with her son.

The King was with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Breathing heavily, for his anger had by no means subsided, he confided that he thought it

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dangerous for the Queen's mad son to remain in court. God knew what he might do next. He must be sent away. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, being the Prince's trusted friends (the trusted friends bowed), must accompany him to England. And without delay. No sooner had the two pupil-spies left the King, than the master-spy joined him. Polonius. His news was that Hamlet, even now, was on his way to his mother. He, Polonius, would hide and overhear whatever passed between them. The old eavesdropper hastened away, and the King, from force of habit, smiled. But it was a smile that died almost as soon as it had been born.

"O my offence is rank," he cried out in wretchedness. "It smells to heaven."

The play, with its presentation of the murder, had opened up his soul and exposed the breeding poison in it. He had murdered his brother and stolen his brother's wife. He was in agony for what he had done; and a double agony, for, though he bitterly repented his deed, he could not repent the possession of the gains it had brought him. "Help, angels!" he groaned, and knelt to pray forgiveness from God.

So deeply was he lost in his despairing plea to heaven that he never heard the soft footfall behind him, nor the sharp indrawn breath. Hamlet stood behind him, with sword upraised. He had, in passing, glimpsed the kneeling King. At once the rich, broad back invited him to the hideous duty he knew he must perform. He hesitated.

"Now might I do it," he breathed. The sword remained unmoving. The man was praying. To kill him now would send his soul to heaven. Better wait for a worse time; then he would go to hell. Silently the Prince withdrew and went upon his way.

"My words fly up," sighed the King, rising to his feet, "my thoughts remain below. Words without thoughts never to heaven go."

Hamlet, in obedience to her wishes, came to the Queen, his mother. His mood was black with self-contempt. He had failed. Revenge had been within his grasp, and his sword had stuck in the air. It had not been because the King was at his prayers that the avenger had spared him, but because the avenger was not, by nature, an avenger. As always, thought had come between Hamlet and the deed. The consequences, like the long

SHAKESPEARE STORIES

shadow of action, ever cooled him as he drew close. Action must needs be hot . . .

The Queen was in her bedchamber. Her hair was loose and streaked with silver, as if she had been too long in the moon. Beside her yawned the royal bed, gorged with kissing pillows and silken sheets.

"Now, mother, what's the matter?" demanded Hamlet harshly, as the rage against himself turned against the hateful scene before him.

Sharply, she reproached him. More sharply he reproached her.

"Come, come, you answer with an idle tongue," cried the Queen, with the authority of an outraged mother.

"Go, go, you question with a wicked tongue," returned Hamlet, with the authority of an outraged son. His words grew savage, violent; his look was wild, his sword was in his hand. Alarm seized the Queen. She tried to leave. Hamlet gripped her arm and forced her to sit upon the bed.

"What wilt thou do?" she shrieked in terror. "Thou wilt not murder me? Help, ho!"

"What ho! Help!" A voice, shrill with alarm, cried out from behind a curtain.

"A rat!" shouted Hamlet, whirling round in amazed fury. "Dead for a ducat, dead!"

He plunged his sword deep into the curtain. He felt it enter more than cloth and air. He heard the sighing cry of a life escaping!

"What hast thou done?" cried out the Queen in dread.

"Nay, I know not," whispered Hamlet, staring at his dripping blade. He trembled with excitement. "Is it the King?"

He drew back the curtain. Polonius glared up at him. He had killed the eavesdropping old man. Action, at last performed, had mocked him. His heart ached with horror and pity. "Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool," he mourned, "farewell. I took thee for thy better." He let fall the curtain and turned to his white-faced mother. "Peace, sit you down," he muttered, "and let me wring your heart."

She sank back upon the bed and tried, unavailingly, to shut her ears against such words as no son in all the world had ever stabbed a mother with. Tears made rivers in her cheeks and drowned her pearls as Hamlet

pitilessly laid bare his mother's easy lust and the shameless corruption of her bed. Her husband-lover—

“A murderer and a villain!” accused Hamlet.

“No more,” wept the Queen.

“A king of shreds and patches—”

Suddenly he fell silent. His looks altered and he seemed to stare into vacancy. He uttered words that made no sense.

“Alas, he's mad,” breathed the Queen. She sat, not daring to move, till her son's fit should be over.

It was no madness that had suddenly stopped his tongue and engrossed his looks. The ghost had returned! The dead King's hopeless eyes dwelt forlornly on the bed, then fixed themselves upon the Prince.

“Do not forget,” uttered the spirit. “This visitation is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose.” Its bleak, unhappy gaze turned upon the trembling Queen. “Speak to her, Hamlet,” pleaded the dead King, as an aching memory of fondness stirred the ashes of his heart. Hamlet obeyed.

“How is it with you, lady?”

“Alas, how is't with you?” asked the Queen, who saw no ghost but only her mad son transfixed. “Whereon do you look?”

“On him, on him,” cried Hamlet, pointing to his father and striving, with all his might, with all precise detail and exact picture, to make his mother see the figure by the bed. But all she saw were the bed's hangings, and Hamlet, mad.

“Why, look you there,” cried the Prince, “look how it steals away. My father in his habit as he lived! Look where he goes even now out at the portal!” But she saw neither the ghost's coming, nor the ghost's going. It had not appeared to remind her of forgotten love, but to remind Hamlet of neglected revenge.

The scene had been strange and terrible and the King, had he heard of it, would have been filled with dread. But the quiet spy behind the curtain had overheard with an unrecording ear.

“This counsellor is now most still, most secret, and most grave,” said Hamlet, as he dragged the dead Polonius from the room, “who was in life a foolish prating knave . . . Goodnight, mother.”

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He had hidden the body and would not confess where. It seemed he mocked his own bloody act by hiding the spy who could no more hide himself. Concealment had brought about Polonius's death; now death brought about his concealment. To all urgent questioning the Prince replied in a vein that was tragical-comical.

"Now, Hamlet, where's Polonius?"

"At supper."

"At supper? Where?"

"Not where he eats, but where a's eaten."

But soon the body was found and taken to the chapel. And, that very night, the mad and dangerous Prince was dispatched to England, in the close care of his good friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Dearly would the King have liked to dispatch him to join Polonius, but he dared not. The Queen's love for her son and the people's love for their Prince stood in his way. But England would serve his darker purpose. He entrusted, to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, a sealed letter for the English King. In it he required that Hamlet should directly be put to death.

Ophelia begged to see the Queen. But the Queen was reluctant. Her soul was too burdened with her own griefs to endure the sight of Ophelia's. Nonetheless she was prevailed upon to see the girl, so Ophelia entered.

She wore, as was proper for her visit, her best and most delicate attire; but had buttoned it all awry, as if she knew she ought to be modest but could not recollect how. She had painted her cheeks, but one less skilfully than the other. Her hair was down and still wild from sleep for, although she had remembered to dress everything else, she had forgotten her head. Which was not to be wondered at: the murder of her father by her one-time lover had quite blown out the candle of her mind. She smiled absurdly at the Queen, and then began to sing. But there was more madness in her music than music in her madness, for she kept neither tune nor time. The songs she sang were lewd fragments and snatches that came weirdly from her lips. God knew what they meant to her, or where she'd gathered them, or for how long her modesty had kept them folded, like bride-gowns, at the bottom of her mind.

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The King came in and, together with the Queen, looked on dismayed. "O Gertrude, Gertrude," he sighed to his wife, when the girl, with a dozen or more "Goodnights", had drifted meaninglessly away, "when sorrows come, they come not single spies, but in battalions . . ."

Laertes, the mad girl's brother and son of the murdered man, had returned from France and, even now, was in the city where rumour and discontent were inflaming his already unsteady nature. Bitterly the Queen began to reproach the unthinking insolence of the common people, when the sound of a furious commotion was heard. Doors splintered, steel clashed, and voices shouted. A moment after, Laertes, with sword drawn and some half-dozen wild-looking fellows at his heels, burst in. He glared about, saw the King, and bade his followers leave him and guard the door.

"O thou vile King!" he accused. "Give me my father!"

The Queen tried to hold him back.

"Let him go, Gertrude," said the King calmly. "Do not fear our person. There's such divinity doth hedge a king, that treason can but peep to what it would . . ."

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Laertes faltered. Royalty awed him, and so did the thought of the King's Swiss guards. He took his advantage where it lay, and grew peaceable. Then Ophelia came back. As if reminded of a childish duty neglected, she had returned with a gift of flowers. She had gathered them from somewhere wild, for her gown was stained and torn and her white arms scratched. She smiled at her brother as if he was a stranger.

"O heavens," wept the young man, seeing the ruins of his sister, "is't possible a young maid's wits should be as mortal as an old man's life?"

She began to sing, no lewd fragments now, but the mournful ditty of a burying. Then she gave away her flowers, telling the proper virtue of each as she gave them to her brother, to the King, and to the Queen . . .

"There's rue for you. And here's some for me. We may call it herb of grace a Sundays. You must wear your rue with a difference," she said to the Queen, with an eerie cunning smile. She returned to singing, and presently, with a quick, "God be wi' you!" fled from the room.

The King, with cautious sympathy and enclosing arm, led the distressed brother aside, and promised to tell him how the tragedies had come about, and who had been to blame: not him—not him . . .

Two sailors, rough and slanting, with cutlasses wide enough to divide a man, brought a letter to Horatio, who had remained in Elsinore, and waited while he read it. The letter was from Hamlet. He was in Denmark. The vessel on which he'd sailed had been pursued by pirates. The ships had briefly grappled. Hamlet had boarded the pirate and been taken prisoner. His own ship had escaped and continued on to England. Since then he had come to terms with his captors. They were good fellows and would bring Horatio to where Hamlet now waited. Also, they had letters for the King.

At once, Horatio went with one of the sailors to meet with Hamlet, while the other took his letters to the King.

The King was still with Laertes. He had told the young man how Hamlet had murdered Polonius and had become dangerous to the throne itself. Laertes listened, and wondered why the King had done nothing against the murderer.

"Break not your sleeps for that," murmured the King, smiling his

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old smile that slipped round his lips like oil. "You shortly shall hear more . . ."

It was then that he was given the sailor's letter. Hastily he read it. Rage and amazement filled him. Hamlet was returned. Hamlet who should, by all the King's shrewd scheming, have been dead in England, was once more in Denmark. Tomorrow he would be coming to the court.

"Let him come!" begged Laertes, wild with hatred for his father's killer and longing only to destroy him. The King, desiring Hamlet's death no less, paced to and fro, brooding upon some means whereby this might be brought about, a means by which no blame should be laid at any door and even the Queen should think it an accident. His Queen was always in the front of his thoughts. His love for her was almost a sickness, equal with his guilt. He paused in his pacing, and beckoned Laertes to his side.

"What would you undertake," he asked softly, "to show yourself in deed your father's son more than in words?"

"To cut his throat i' the church!" came the prompt reply.

The King shook his head. The scheme he had in mind was different. Hamlet, who delighted in swordplay, was to be tempted into a fencing match with Laertes. One of the weapons would be unbated and needle-sharp. With this, Laertes might, as if by unlucky chance, kill his man. As he confided the scheme, the King watched the young man shrewdly, to see if so mean and dishonourable a proposal repelled him. But Laertes was Polonius's son, and guile and concealment were in his blood. He entered into the scheme with all his heart, and gilded its cunning with some of his own. He had brought back from France a deadly poison, and with this he'd anoint his sword. It was a poison for which there was no remedy, and the merest scratch would procure Hamlet's certain death. The King smiled. Poison was the means whereby he had gained his Queen and crown; it was fitting that poison should be the means whereby he secured them. It must be by poison. Therefore, if Laertes failed to wound the Prince, a poisoned cup should be awaiting Hamlet when he paused to quench his thirst.

So Hamlet's death was encompassed; but even as it was nodded upon, there came news of another, lesser death. The weeping Queen came in to

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tell that Ophelia had been drowned. Frail mad Ophelia was dead. The news brought forth no wild excess of grief; but was received with quietness, as if this was calamity's fragile herald, sent in advance of its huge self.

A gravedigger was singing at his work. A jovial soul: the deeper he dug, the higher rose his spirits, and his song flew up in snatches, together with flying clods of earth. Hamlet and Horatio, on their way from the seashore to the castle, drew near; and the gravedigger, finding he had attracted a noble audience, paused, beamed, and wiped his brow. Amused by such good cheer among the bones, Hamlet fell into talk with the man; and Horatio could not but smile to see how his friend readily forgot his griefs and troubles in the pleasure of argument and debate, for the scholar-prince got as good as he gave. The gravedigger, by toiling so long among the grinners, had come by a shrewd and bony wit.

"What man dost thou dig it for?"

"For no man, sir."

"What woman, then?"

"For none neither."

"Who is to be buried in't?"

"One that was a woman, sir; but rest her soul, she's dead."

Presently he threw up a skull. Whose was it? Why, it was the old King's jester, Yorick . . .

"This?" murmured Hamlet, taking the skull in his hands and gazing at it, so that his sad smile was answered by its sightless grin.

"E'n that," said the gravedigger.

"Alas, poor Yorick," sighed the Prince. "I knew him, Horatio . . ." As Hamlet mused, the gravedigger continued with his work, for the grave's tenant was approaching to take possession of the premises. A sombre procession moved towards the grave, with a coffin borne on a swaying tide of black. The King and Queen were among the mourners: plainly the burial was for one of high estate. Hamlet and Horatio drew back, to observe the scene from a distance. The coffin was lowered into the earth, but the priest intoned no prayer; for the death had been doubtful. Suddenly, from among the mourners, Laertes stepped for-

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ward; and Hamlet saw that the grave he had laughed over had been made for Ophelia. He cried out in anguish; but his cry was quite lost in the shouted grief of Laertes, whose words and feelings were as extravagant as his attire. His black was a whole night to Hamlet's little corner of dark; his grieving was a tempest to Hamlet's aching sighs. Frantically he leaped down into the grave to catch up his sister for one last embrace; and Hamlet, enraged that Ophelia, whom he had loved, should be used as a property for such gaudy grief, rushed forward to grapple with Laertes in the grave. Fiercely they fought until they were dragged apart. Then Hamlet, much ashamed, retired with Horatio; and the burial of Ophelia was concluded.

SHAKESPEARE STORIES

"Strengthen your patience," murmured the King to Laertes, and reminded him that revenge would soon be his.

"So Guildenstern and Rosencrantz go to't," murmured Horatio. He and Hamlet were alone in the great hall of the castle; and Hamlet had told him how, on the ship bound for England, he had found, in the cabin of his two good schoolfriends, a sealed letter to be given to the English king. He had opened it and read therein his own death warrant. So he had, most skilfully, exchanged for another in which he had put forward Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in place of himself. Thus those two gentlemen had sailed on to England bearing with them, not Hamlet's, but their own deaths.

"Why, man, they did make love to this employment! They are not near my conscience," cried Hamlet, as if to defend himself against the sad regret he sensed in Horatio's words. Regret there certainly had been, not for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, but for Hamlet himself. His was the tragedy, not theirs. Sadly Horatio gazed at the brilliant, lively and noble young Prince who had been dragged back into an ancient, corrupt world of poison, murder and revenge.

As they talked, there was a gust of perfume, a rustle of satins, and a courtier came into the hall. He was a delicate gentleman with a feathered bonnet and butterfly hands. He talked very roundabout, and with so many bows that his listeners marvelled at his flexibility. His message, when at last it was unravelled, was from the King, and was amiable enough. Having heard that, of late, Laertes had won a great reputation for fencing, and knowing Hamlet's fondness for the sport, the King had laid a wager on the outcome of a match between them—that is, if the Lord Hamlet was agreeable to trying his skill against Laertes. Thus appealed to, Hamlet could not refuse. He was proud of his skill as a swordsman and always eager for a chance to show it off.

"Sir, I will walk here in the hall," he informed the courtier. "Let the foils be brought, the gentleman willing, and the King hold his purpose, I will win for him and I can; if not, I will gain nothing but my shame and the odd hits."

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When the courtier had departed, Hamlet frowned and shook his head. He knew not why, but a strange uneasiness had seized him.

"If your mind dislike anything, obey it," said Horatio anxiously. "I will forestall their repair hither and say you are not fit."

Hamlet smiled and shook his head. "We defy augury," he said. "There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all . . ."

Trumpets announced the approach of the King. The courtier had delivered his message promptly. The King and Queen entered the hall attended by all the court. Two servants carried a table, and a lord bore a bouquet of swords, like a bridesman of Death.

All was smiles and good humour, as if Hamlet's madness had never been. "Come, Hamlet, come," urged the affable King; and he drew the Prince and Laertes together so that they might clasp hands and seal their friendship in forgiveness.

"Give me your pardon, sir," said Hamlet warmly, for there was no enmity in his heart for Laertes. "I have done you wrong."

Laertes responded with equal generosity, and the King's smile broadened. The swords were offered. Laertes, being the quicker, chose first. "This is too heavy," he said with a frown, flourishing the weapon he had drawn. "Let me see another." Plainly he was a most fastidious swordsman. At length he found a blade to his satisfaction. The swords were offered to Hamlet, who cheerfully took the first that came. The two young men saluted each other in steel, and awaited the King's word for the bout to begin.

The King called for wine so that he might drink Hamlet's health should he win. The cups were filled and set upon the table. The King, with a royal gesture, held out a splendid pearl. If Laertes should be defeated, the pearl would be cast into Hamlet's cup of wine. The court murmured, and applauded the magnificence of the prize.

"Come, begin!" exclaimed the King. "And you, the judges, bear a wary eye."

Swords touched, and the judges, two dancing, skipping, hopping courtiers, followed the weaving blades. The fencers, both in black, for



each mourned a murdered father, circled one another, made swift lunges, darted back, lunged again, parried, thrust, riposted—

“One!” cried Hamlet, triumphantly.

“No!” cried Laertes.

The judges were appealed to, and declared: “A hit, a very palpable hit.”

“Well, again!” demanded Laertes.

“Stay,” ordered the King. “Give me drink. Hamlet, this pearl is thine.” He cast it into Hamlet’s cup, and offered it to the Prince. But Hamlet would not drink. He would try another bout first. He and Laertes fenced again; and again Hamlet scored a hit.

“Our son shall win,” said the King. The Queen smiled proudly, and offered her son her napkin to wipe his sweating brow.

“The Queen carouses to thy fortune, Hamlet,” she said, and took a cup of wine.

“Gertrude, do not drink!” muttered the King, his face grey with horror.

“I will, my lord,” said she. “I pray you pardon me.”

The cup she held was Hamlet’s cup. She drank the poison that had been laid for her son.

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"My lord, I'll hit him now!" whispered Laertes to the King.

"I do not think it," said the King, whose eyes were upon his poisoned Queen, and whose whole world was beginning to crack and crumble about him.

"Have at you now!" shouted Laertes, seeing Hamlet unprepared. He thrust at him, and caught him on the wrist. Hamlet looked down amazed. He was bleeding. Laertes' sword had been unbated! He looked up at Laertes and saw guilt and hatred in his eyes. Bewilderment, then fury seized him. Though he never knew it, he had been fighting for his life. Savagely he flung himself upon Laertes, and beat the weapon from his hand. He picked it up, and contemptuously flung Laertes his own. They fought again: Laertes in terror, and Hamlet with all the skill at his command.

"Part them," cried out the King, "they are incensed!"

"Nay, come again!" shouted Hamlet, and, with a sudden thrust, pierced Laertes through.

Now the poison was spread, the poison that had, so long, rotted away the castle of Elsinore; and it was a poison, like the venom Laertes had brought back, for which there was no remedy. The Queen, the easy, lustful Queen, felt agony seize her. She cried out: "The drink, the drink! O my dear Hamlet! The drink, the drink! I am poisoned!" She fell back, and with lifeless eyes stared at her son.

"Let the door be locked!" shouted Hamlet. "Treachery! Seek it out!"

"It is here, Hamlet," sighed Laertes, bleeding from his wound, and dying from the venom of his own blade. "Hamlet, thou art slain. No medicine in the world can do thee good; in thee there is not half an hour's life . . ." So Laertes, while there was still breath in him, confessed his treachery, and pointed to the one whose crime, like Cain's, had brought about so many deaths. "The King—the King's to blame."

There was no delaying now, no breathing time for thought. With a terrible cry, Hamlet rushed upon the King and stabbed him with his sword. But, like a serpent, the King would not die.

"Here, thou incestuous, murderous, damned Dane, drink off this potion!" the avenger cried and forced the poisoned cup between the King's unresisting lips, and made him drink. "Follow my mother!"

SHAKESPEARE STORIES

"He is justly served," breathed Laertes; and with the last of his life, begged forgiveness of Hamlet for what he had done. Like Hamlet, he had avenged his father; and, like Hamlet, he died for it.

"I follow thee," murmured Hamlet, over the young man who now lay quiet and still. "I am dead, Horatio," he whispered to his friend who had come forward to support him. He trembled as a chill began to invade him. Then he smiled ruefully. "This fell sergeant, Death, is strict in his arrest . . ."

There came a sound of martial music and gunfire from outside the castle walls. A messenger entered, to tell that Fortinbras, the victorious Prince of Norway, was approaching. With a last effort, Hamlet roused himself. He was a Prince, and his concerns were now with the state, good order, and the well-being of his people. "The election lights on Fortinbras. He has my dying voice," decreed the Prince. Then, all strength spent, he fell back in Horatio's arms. "The rest is silence," he sighed.

Through veils and veils of tears, Horatio gazed down upon the quiet countenance that rested against his arm. "Good night, sweet Prince, and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest."

It was thus that Fortinbras found them, the dead and those who still lived, in the great hall of the castle of Elsinore.

"Let four captains bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage," said Fortinbras, when he had heard Hamlet's story, "for he was likely, had he been put on, to have proved most royal . . ." The captains lifted up the dead Prince and carried him away. "Go, bid the soldiers shoot," commanded Fortinbras; and solemn gunfire roared in honour of the Prince of Denmark.

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