

**Horrors of the London burial grounds, being a correct account of the horrible disclosures made by gravediggers : with the manner of cutting up dead bodies, and other horrible transactions.**

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**HORRORS**

OF THE

**LONDON BURIAL GROUNDS,**

BEING

**A CORRECT ACCOUNT**

OF THE

**HORRIBLE DISCLOSURES**

MADE BY

**GRAVEDIGGERS;**

WITH THE MANNER OF

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**HORRIBLE TRANSACTIONS.**

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# HORRORS

OF THE

## LONDON BURIAL GROUNDS

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The following diabolical transactions was committed in the of St. Clement's Danes, in the burial ground of Portugal Street, in Lincoln's-Inn Fields, where the remains of the immortal Joe Miller were interred, but which have, no doubt, long since shared the same fate. The detestible doings of which we shall speak are as they have been committed with the knowledge and under the orders of Fitch, the Sexton for sixteen years, and his man Watkins. The account is put forth by William Chamberlain, the second gravedigger who resides at No. 1, Wild Street, Lincoln's-Inn, and who has recently published a document;—

'The man, Watkins, helped me to lift up pieces of bodies (interred) on the pickaxe. On a Sunday morning, Watkins and I, in the Portugal Street, Burial-ground, have made the neighbourhood ring again with the noise of the breaking up of the sound of the hammers. We have had as many as twenty or thirty people round the railings. Mr. Edwards, the bell-ringer, burnt nothing but coffin-wood since the winter. I can name the man who has had coffin-wood brought from the vaults of St. Clements, to burn in his own house

an who has carried it to that person's own house. The people in the houses in Clements-lane, looking over the burial-ground, hundreds of times cried shame on our doings. I also know that oaths have been made, with an oath, to run up a wall to prevent the people from seeing the chopping up. I have seen a cart load of coffin-wood lying on the ground. I have often said that I could not get it up, and have been told somebody else must. I commenced working in the year 1831, and continued till the year 1836. I had dug a vault in the green ground, Portugal Street, to bury another man; I had one foot in the coffin in the vault, and the other on the ground; a gush like a puff of wind came from the coffin under my feet, so that I felt my power leave me; and one of the mourners gave me a glass of wine to get some drink. From that time I have never been well, I am now a cripple, as I have stated in my evidence before the Committee of the House of Commons.

But, however, shuddering humanity should doubt this statement, I will give you an extract from this evidence, as SWORN to in the House of Commons.

I worked between five and six years before I was taken ill; I was taken ill; I got up one Sunday morning and went into the ground in Portugal Street; we had a grave to open; I believe it was ten feet deep; the men completed the work, and I cut four or five coffins through a piece of ground, and the bodies of some; I placed the flesh in a cart, and I went home to my breakfast: it was our church time; I did not dare do any more till the people were in church, for the cutting away the wood was so terrible that mobs used to be sent to railings and looking! we could not throw a piece of wood or a body up without being seen; the people actually cried, 'Look out of the windows at the backs of the houses on account of the noise!' I do not you find it hard work to cut through a solid coffin? I have been an hour and a half or two hours over them, cutting the lead and taking the sides of the coffins up, and I have

spoken to the head grave-digger about it, and said, 'We shall get this grave done on account of this wood; the wood is so rotten that you cannot move it: not even the cloth hardly soiled, or the rusted.' 'How many coffins have you dug through, and bored through, to get a depth of ten feet?' 'To get ten feet of ground must cut through at least five or six, in the almshouses I could cover, at least, and expose a dozen of coffins within one hour. Do not you feel a degree of compunction when you first began to dig through those bodies which had just been interred?' 'Yes; I felt timid and a great dread of doing so; but having nothing else to do, I did not know what to do.' 'Under whose orders did you do it?' 'Under Fitch and Mr. Watkins's orders. Mr. Fitch is the sexton, and Mr. Watkins is the man that employed me first; I have heard Mr. Watkins say to Mr. Fitch, 'Sir,' says he, 'What shall we do with this wood?' 'I have heard him swear, and say, 'You must do it; you must get this wood away!' 'Do you repeat the statement, that it is impossible for you to make a grave in that grave-yard now without cutting through the bodies?' 'Without cutting through the bodies, and many of them perfectly fresh, you cannot get even three feet of grave, nor yet more.' 'How near is the wood of the coffins to the surface?' 'There are now within a foot of the surface.' 'What do you mean by doing with them?' 'Breaking the coffins up, and cutting the flesh in bits, and burying it.' 'This is done with the perfect cognizance and approbation of the sexton?' 'Yes!' 'In fact, by his order and instruction?' 'Yes; I have heard him order it—there are instruments kept for the purpose of cutting away coffins, a chopper and a saw; there is no objection for them in regard of digging a grave in the middle of the ground.' 'Do you suppose that there is no place in that burial-ground in which it would be possible to find a place where three feet of depth could be given to a body about to be interred, without interfering with others?' 'There is not, except it is in family graves. Do you date your complaint from 1836?' 'From 1836; I have never been free from pain

tine. 'After you were first taken ill and sent to the hospital, you, upon your recovery, return to this occupation?' No! I was not fit for it; they would have been glad for me to have come, because they said there was not a better grave-digger in London than I was, for my industry and getting the things according to order. 'But with all that they said to you, you still refused, because you felt that your illness was the consequence of your occupation, and that if you returned to your occupation you would be probably ill again?' I may say it would have caused my death if I had kept on with it. 'After you are now positively ill, so ill as not to be able to work, had you any symptoms gradually coming on?' It first came on in my feet.—'What came on?' Violent pain through the dampness of the ground, and sore and swollen knees from kneeling on the wet coffins; open coffins, which were often full of water and pieces of flesh; and we have had to bucket out the water and pieces of flesh, and we made holes in the ground and let the water run out. Do you not think the illness in your knees might be consequent upon the wet of the damp coffins and not the effluvia?' 'That is partly the occasion of it. Your wife is now afflicted with the same complaint that you have?' Yes; the doctors told one another that they termed this complaint to be catching. 'Does the sexton receive any emolument from the interment?' Yes. 'Do you know what those emoluments are?' In the first place he received his own wages upon each interment; then again he stops 6d. out of the first digging, and then he stops 6d. out of each foot after the first digging. 'The regular money is 18d. a foot, and he gives 6d., and that allowance the first gravedigger has 1s., and I never received myself more than 4d. after the first digging. 'You were second gravedigger?' Yes. 'What was that why you received 4d.?' That is why I only received 4d. but it was ordered by the churchwardens. 'It is, then, a fact that the sexton is interested in the burying of as many bodies as possible in the churchyard?' Yes, he is; the more bodies he can bury, the more it is to his profit. 'Is it or is it not the duty of the sexton

to communicate to the churchwardens as to what is the state of burial-ground?' Yes, it is his duty to do so. 'Do you believe sexon was in the habit of doing so?' I cannot say that he was in the habit of doing so; I know that there have been many still-borns that like, which has never been entered upon the books, and which has been buried, and received the money for them. 'Have they been buried with the Church service performed over them?' No, still-borns have not; they have been put in after the mourners are gone, in other funerals; they have been put in on the tops of coffins, and at the heads and feet.

What man who has lost a pure sister, a spotless daughter, or a wife would like to see her thus torn, as if by a Persian Ghon, the sanctuary of the grave, her limbs exposed to an execrating and then, having been hewed into pits poured from a bucket of water into a hole! It is degrading alike to religion and all feelings, and we might suspect the testimony to be highly coloured. But it is supported by the evidence of indifferent persons, resident in the immediate neighbourhood of the burial ground, it looks somewhat like corroborative proof. Mr. J. M. Lane, cane-worker, supplies the following:—

'What is the mode of interment practised?—Digging a shallow grave at times, and then a few weeks afterwards they will go and dig it up. There was one occasion when my wife noticed it more than any other time; there was a corpse buried on a Sunday, from the hospital, and there were two females following it; what made us take particular notice of it was, that they came from the hospital, and went out at the gate, across the ground towards Clare Market, and then came back to the hospital. In the course of a month afterwards they dug up his grave again, and when they opened it they brought the coffin in pieces, not split, but the sides were taken from the head and feet board; they brought it up without splitting, just as you might take a case to pieces, or the lid off a box. After they had brought



and laid it on the ground, they brought up the bones with the  
 changing in tatters upon it, then about four shovels of soft sub-  
 came up, and my wife called to the person in the next room  
 to witness the thing; they called out to the men; the men made them-  
 selves lower, but turned their backs towards the houses to try to avoid  
 people seeing it, but the window being high, we could see every-  
 thing that came out of the grave; they were not far off. At another  
 a lady was brought out of King's College Hospital, and it was  
 thrown without any service over it. I do not know what was the  
 occasion of that. — Chairman: have you in the early part of the morning,  
 seen a knocking in the church-yard? Yes, — What did you attribute  
 it to? I know what it was. What was it? They were destroying  
 the coffins. — In the morning they destroy the coffins? Before  
 eight. I have looked, and I have seen them at work with hand-  
 saws tied over their noses and mouths. — Breaking in coffins?  
 Yes. — **CHURCH-YARD CHAPEL** — This building is situated about midway on the  
 east side of Clement's Lane, Strand. — Mr. Samuel Pittis Evidence.  
 Will you state to the Committee generally the state of the inter-  
 ment in the cemetery of that chapel? At the time I attended it,  
 was from the year 1828, for six or seven years, there were in-  
 tents, and the place was in a very filthy state; the smell was most  
 offensive and very injurious. How many dead bodies are there in this place? I should  
 say ten or twelve thousand! In a space of 50 or 60 feet by 40?  
 Your statement is, that in the space of 59 feet by 29, they  
 buried as many as 12,000 bodies? From what I have understood,  
 many have been removed, to make room for others; I did  
 not see it come through a woman who used to wash for Mrs. Howse,  
 who used to burn the coffins under the copper, and frequently in  
 the fire-place.