

HAMLET

HAMLET WAS THE ONLY SON OF THE King of Denmark. He loved his father and mother dearly—and was happy in the love of a sweet lady named Ophelia. Her father, Polonius, was in charge of running the King’s household.

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While Hamlet was away studying at Wittenberg, his father died. Young Hamlet hastened home in great grief to hear that a snake had bit the King, killing him. The young Prince had loved his father, and so he was shocked to learn that the Queen, before yet the King had been laid in the ground a month, had determined to marry again—and to marry the dead King’s brother, Claudius.

Hamlet refused to put off mourning for the wedding.

“It is not only the black I wear on my body that proves my loss,” he said. “I wear mourning in my heart for my dead father. His son at least remembers him, and grieves still.”

Then said Claudius, “This grief is unreasonable. Of course you must sorrow at the loss of your father, but—”

“Ah,” said Hamlet, bitterly, “I cannot in one little month forget those I love.”

With that the Queen and Claudius left him, to make merry over their wedding, forgetting the poor good King who had been so kind to them both.

And Hamlet, left alone, began to wonder what he ought to do, because he did not believe the story about the snake-bite. It seemed to him that Claudius had killed the King, so as to get the crown and marry the Queen. Yet he had no proof.

Soon Hamlet was visited by Horatio, a fellow student and friend of his, from Wittenberg.

“What brought you here?” asked Hamlet, after greeting his friend

kindly.

“I came, my lord, to see your father’s funeral.”

“I think it was to see my mother’s wedding,” said Hamlet, bitterly. “My father! We shall not look upon his like again.”

“My lord,” answered Horatio, “I think I saw him yesternight.”

Then, while Hamlet listened in surprise, Horatio told how he, with two gentlemen of the guard, had seen the King’s ghost on the battlements of the castle. Hamlet went that night, and true enough, at midnight, the ghost of the King, in the armor he had been known to wear, appeared on the battlements in the chill of the moonlight. Hamlet was a brave youth, and he spoke to his father’s ghost. The ghost told him that what he had suspected was true. The wicked King Claudius had indeed killed the King, by dropping poison into his ear as he slept in his orchard in the afternoon.

“And you,” said the ghost, “must avenge this cruel murder on my wicked brother. But do nothing against the Queen, for I have loved her, and she is your mother. Remember me.”

Then seeing the morning approach, the ghost vanished.

“Now,” said Hamlet, “there is nothing left but revenge. Remember thee—I will remember nothing else—books, pleasure, youth—let all go—and your commands alone shall live on in my brain.”

So when his friends came back he made them swear to keep the secret of the ghost, and then went in from the battlements, now gray with mingled dawn and moonlight, to think how he might best avenge his murdered father.

The shock of seeing and hearing his father’s ghost made him feel almost mad, and for fear that his uncle might notice that he was not himself, he determined to hide his mad longing for revenge under a pretended madness in other matters.

And when he met Ophelia, who loved him—and to whom he had given gifts, and letters, and many loving words—he behaved so wildly to her that she could not but think him mad. For she loved him so that she could not believe he would be so cruel as this, unless he were quite mad. So she told her father, and showed him a letter from Hamlet. And in the letter was much