

THE SCULPTOR'S FUNERAL

by WILLA CATHER

adapted for the stage by WALTER WYKES

CHARACTERS

ARMY MAN
BANKER PHELPS
BANKER ELDER
SHERIFF
CATTLEMAN
COAL-AND-LUMBER DEALER
RAILROAD MAN
BOSTON MAN
MINISTER
LAWYER
OTHER TOWNSPEOPLE

TIME

1905

CAUTION: Professionals and amateurs are hereby warned that *The Sculptor's Funeral* is subject to a royalty. It is fully protected under the copyright laws of the United States of America, and of all countries covered by the International Copyright Union (including the Dominion of Canada and the rest of the British Commonwealth), and of all countries covered by the Pan-American Copyright convention and the Universal Copyright Convention, and of all countries with which the United States has reciprocal copyright relations. All rights, including professional and amateur stage performing, motion picture, recitation, lecturing, public reading, radio broadcasting, television, video or sound taping, all other forms of mechanical or electronic reproduction, such as information storage and retrieval systems and photocopying, and the rights of translation into foreign languages, are strictly reserved.

Inquiries concerning all rights should be addressed to the author at sandmaster@aol.com

Copyright © 2006 by Walter Wykes

THE SCULPTOR'S FUNERAL

[The parlor of a naked, weather-beaten frame house. A group of local townspeople have gathered to pay respects to one of their own—a man who now lies in the coffin in the center of the room. A golden palm leaf lies across the black cover of the coffin. The only person who stands out in this crowd is the BOSTON MAN. In his city clothes, he sits a little apart from the others—outside the circle. Silence.]

ARMY MAN

S'pose there'll be a will, Phelps?

[BANKER PHELPS laughs disagreeably and begins trimming his nails with a pearl-handled pocketknife.]

BANKER PHELPS

There'll scarcely be any need for one, will there?

ARMY MAN

Why, the ole man says Harve's done right well lately.

BANKER ELDER

I reckon he means by that Harve ain't asked him to mortgage any more farms lately so he could go on with his education.

ARMY MAN

Seems like my mind don't reach back to a time when Harve wasn't bein' edycated.

[There is a general chuckle. The BOSTON MAN seems surprised and alarmed by this. The MINISTER takes out his handkerchief and blows his nose loudly. BANKER PHELPS closes his knife with a snap.]

BANKER PHELPS

It's too bad the old man's sons didn't turn out better.

SHERIFF

Never did hang together—did they?

BANKER PHELPS

He spent money enough on Harve to stock a dozen cattle farms and he might as well have poured it into Sand Creek.

BANKER ELDER

If Harve had stayed home, helped nurse what little they had—

BANKER PHELPS

—gone into stock on the old man's bottom farm, they might all have been well fixed. But the old man had to trust everything to tenants.

SHERIFF

He was cheated right and left, too.

CATTLEMAN

Harve never could have handled stock none.

ARMY MAN

He didn't have it in him to be sharp.

CATTLEMAN

You remember when he bought Sander's mules for eight-year-olds, when everybody in town knew that Sander's father-in-law give 'em to his wife for a wedding present eighteen years before, an' they was full-grown mules then.

[Again everyone chuckles, and the ARMY MAN rubs his knees with a spasm of childish delight. The LAWYER sits quietly, his head down.]

COAL-AND-LUMBER DEALER

Harve never was much account for anything practical.

RAILROAD MAN

He shore was never fond of work.

COAL-AND-LUMBER DEALER

I mind the last time he was home; the day he left, when the old man was out to the barn helpin' his hand hitch up to take Harve to the train, and Cal Moots was patchin' up the fence, Harve, he come out on the step and sings out, in his ladylike voice: "Cal Moots, Cal Moots! Please come cord my trunk."

RAILROAD MAN

That's Harve for you.

ARMY MAN

I kin hear him howlin' yet when he was a big feller in long pants and his mother used to whale him with a rawhide in the barn for lettin' the cows git foundered in the cornfield when he was drivin' 'em home from pasture.

CATTLEMAN

He killed a cow of mine that-a-way onc't—a pure Jersey and the best milker I had, an' the ole man had to put up for her. Harve, he was watchin' the sun set acros't the marshes when the animal got away; he argued that sunset was uncommon fine.

[Laughter.]

BOSTON MAN

[Standing.]

I'm sorry, I ... I know I don't belong here ... I mean, I'm not one of you ... I don't know anything about your town, and I don't mean to speak out of turn, but ... I feel obligated to ask ... is it possible that ... that you don't *realize* ... that you aren't *aware* ... that the palm on that coffin means nothing to you?

[He looks around incredulous.]

Harvey Merrick was a great sculptor. I was one of his students. He was highly respected in the world of art.

[Pause.]

BANKER PHELPS

Where the old man made his mistake was in sending the boy East to school. That was where he got his head full of traipsing to Paris and all such folly.

BOSTON MAN

But ... his work is housed in some of the finest museums in Europe.

BANKER ELDER

What Harve needed, of all people, was a course in some first-class Kansas City business college.

BOSTON MAN

Business college? I ... I don't think you understand—

BANKER PHELPS

Oh, we understand well enough.

BOSTON MAN

But—

CATTLEMAN

Forty's young for a Merrick to cash in; they usually hang on pretty well.

SHERIFF

Probably he helped it along with whisky.

BOSTON MAN

He was no drunkard!

MINISTER

His mother's people were not long-lived, and Harvey never had a robust constitution.

CATTLEMAN

Nevertheless, there is no disputin' that Harve frequently looked upon the wine when it was red, also variegated, and it shore made an uncommon fool of him.

[Again, there is general laughter. Suddenly, the LAWYER stands and smashes his fist into the parlor door. His face has grown red and is convulsed with anger. The others start involuntarily.]

LAWYER

I've been with you gentlemen before, when you've sat by the coffins of boys born and raised in this town; and, if I remember rightly, you were never any too well satisfied when you checked them up. What's the matter, anyhow? Why is it that reputable young men are as scarce as millionaires in Sand City? It might almost seem to a stranger that there was some way something the matter with your progressive town. Why did Ruben Sayer, the brightest young lawyer you ever turned out, after he had come home from the university as straight as a die, take to drinking and forge a check and shoot himself? Why did Bill Merrit's son die of the shakes in a saloon in Omaha? Why was Mr. Thomas's son, here, shot in a gambling house? Why did young Adams burn his mill to beat the insurance companies and go to the pen? I'll tell you why. Because you drummed nothing but money and knavery into their ears from the time they wore knickerbockers; because you carped away at them as you've been carping here tonight, holding our friends Phelps and Elder up for models, as our grandfathers held up George Washington and John Adams. But the boys, worse luck, were young and raw at the business you put them to; and how could they match coppers with such artists as Phelps and Elder? You wanted them to be successful rascals; they were only unsuccessful ones—that's all the difference. There was only one boy ever raised in this borderland between ruffianism and civilization who didn't come to grief, and you hated Harvey Merrick more for winning out than you hated all the other boys who got under the wheels. Lord, Lord, how you did hate him! Phelps, here, is fond of saying that he could buy and sell us all out any time he's a mind to; but he knew Harve wouldn't have given a tinker's damn for his bank and all his cattle farms put together; and a lack of appreciation, that way, goes hard with Phelps. Old Nimrod, here, thinks Harve drank too much; and this from such as Nimrod and me! Brother Elder says Harve was too free with the old man's money—fell short in filial consideration, maybe. Well, we can all remember the very tone in which brother Elder swore his own father was a liar, in the county court; and we

all know that the old man came out of that partnership with his son as bare as a sheared lamb. But maybe I'm getting personal, and I'd better be driving ahead at what I want to say. Harvey Merrick and I went to school together, back East. We were dead in earnest, and we wanted you all to be proud of us some day. We meant to be great men. Even I, and I haven't lost my sense of humor, gentlemen, I meant to be a great man. I came back here to practice, and I found you didn't in the least want me to be a great man. You wanted me to be a shrewd lawyer—oh, yes! Our veteran here wanted me to get him an increase of pension, because he had dyspepsia; Phelps wanted a new county survey that would put the widow Wilson's little bottom farm inside his south line; Elder wanted to lend money at five percent a month and get it collected; old Stark here wanted to wheedle old women up in Vermont into investing their annuities in real estate mortgages that aren't worth the paper they're written on. Oh, you needed me hard enough, and you'll go on needing me; and that's why I'm not afraid to plug the truth home to you this once. Well, I came back here and became the damned shyster you wanted me to be. You pretend to have some sort of respect for me; and yet you'll stand up and throw mud at Harvey Merrick, whose soul you couldn't dirty and whose hands you couldn't tie. Oh, you're a discriminating lot of Christians! There have been times when the sight of Harvey's name in some Eastern paper has made me hang my head like a whipped dog; and, again, times when I liked to think of him off there in the world, away from all this hog wallow, doing his great work and climbing the big, clean upgrade he'd set for himself. And we? Now that we've fought and lied and sweated and stolen, and hated as only the disappointed strugglers in a bitter, dead little Western town know how to do, what have we got to show for it? Harvey Merrick wouldn't have given one sunset over your marshes for all you've got put together, and you know it. It's not for me to say why, in the inscrutable wisdom of God, a genius should ever have been called from this place of hatred and bitter waters; but I want this Boston man to know that the drivel he's been hearing here tonight is the only tribute any truly great man could ever have from such a lot of sick, side-tracked, burnt-dog, land-poor sharks as the here-present financiers of Sand City—upon which town may God have mercy!

[The LAWYER thrusts his hand out to the BOSTON MAN as he passes him—then catches up his overcoat and disappears into the hallway. The BOSTON MAN stands there uncertainly for a moment.]

BOSTON MAN

The ... the day he died ... after the congestion of both lungs had shut off any possibility of recovery ... Mr. Merrick asked me to make arrangements—to have his body sent home. “It’s not a pleasant place to be lying while the world is moving and doing and bettering,” he said, “but it rather seems as though we ought to go back to the place we came from in the end.” He told me you would come in for a look at him and that after you’d had your say he wouldn’t have much to fear

from the judgment of God. I didn't understand what he meant at the time—I couldn't comprehend it. Unfortunately, I see that he was right.

[Exit BOSTON MAN. Silence.]

ARMY MAN

It's too bad he didn't belong to some lodge or other. I like an order funeral myself. They seem more appropriate for people of some reputation.

[Lights slowly fade.]

* * *