



ROBERT EARLE

# Playing the Fool

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It started as a joke, of course. Tom dressed as a fool for his high school prom; Tomfoolery is all he meant; he'd been good at it all his life. He wore a spectacular felt hat he made himself with three floppy points tipped by bells. What were the three floppy points about? Two donkey's ears and a donkey's tail. (That was "of course," too. A lot of things, almost everything, was "of course.") Furthermore, the hat was brightly motley, its felt green, purple, blue, and red. The gold ribbon stitched around its bottom half? That signified a mock crown. His date refused to go with him. She ran upstairs in tears. He went alone and every girl danced in his arms.

After that there were costume parties and Halloween festivities and improved fool's costumes and lots of songs, "A Fool for Love," "Fools Rush In," and quotes from Shakespeare, "Lord, what fools these mortals be," and Mark Twain, "It is better to keep your mouth closed and let people think you are a fool than to open it and

remove all doubt," and juggling and tumbling (when he was still young enough) and the story he would tell at elementary schools to the terrified, fascinated third graders:

"You see I was born in the year in 1000, half the world ago. And what has kept me alive so long? This suit, of course! Take it off and I'm gone. Vanished up in smoke. Want to see me do it? Shall I take off my donkey's crown? Throw down my scepter? Pull my last egg out of that pretty little girl's ear and disappear?"

The boys would cry, "Yes, do it!" and the girls would cry, "No, no, don't!" and he'd bow to the girls and thank them and tell them he never would have lived so long if it weren't for their love and he counted on them for the future: Never deny a fool, he would tell them. Give a fool what he wants. And then he would back out of the room, almost gliding on his thin leather slippers.

Some of his own sayings were repeated all over town: "We won't know now, will we? We'll never ever know." "Capering and jumping about and kissing put color in your cheeks--that's why you must do all of it all the time, like me." "When I die, bury me in my finest suit. Don't call it a costume. Don't cry on it and let your tears ruin my fine silk. Laugh and hold hands and do your little jig--make sure you get it right!"

He kept it up and was a fool incognito practicing law and a lawyer flambé playing the fool whenever he got the chance. Tom took his fooling seriously. He did want to be buried in a special suit, sewn with gold thread, the boots red leather, the stockings bright orange, the tunic a blaze of blue and green diamonds, the hat an actual cardinal's hat he bought on the black market in Rome and modified with his points and tinkling bells.

Sometimes he'd put it on and show Henny, his wife, how it looked on him, a small, nimble man grown a bit chubby and wrinkly but cheery. "You have them put this on me, and I want the coffin open so everyone can see His Magnificence one last happy time before down into the darkness I go."

Henny did it. Several mourners had one look and left, upset. For them death's dignity was mocked; the real man was hidden away in one of his pranks. A hundred others stayed on and looked at him in his finery and plumage, most of his face wasted away leaving only his prominent nose, and his fingers covered with gleaming rings, and those pointy little boots on his feet, and they listened as Henny told them this was what Tom wanted. He said he'd always been for life over death, but all his research pointed to death's way out. He could find no escape except to give it the finger.

"I don't know what you think, but when he would try this last fool's suit on for me, I knew he meant it. 'Bury me with a laugh,' he'd say. I know that's trite, but he wasn't giving death the last laugh. 'No, that one's on me.'"

There were smiles among the mourners, smiles women repressed and men shared and a few grandchildren didn't hold back at all.

Reverend Jacks was left to put everything together as the two funeral parlor attendants simultaneously closed the coffin lid and Tom was gone from sight. What would the preacher say? He looked out across the small multitude, taking in the motley faces, for that is what they were, a patchwork of ages and emotions, sympathy for Henny, doubts about what Reverend Jacks would tell them and how much it would matter and what Tom would make of it, prattling as he sometimes did in an unsettling echo of whatever someone wanted him to understand and he refused to understand...just would not...would not understand.

Reverend Jacks stood there a long time, his open Bible resting on his splayed hands, and then he smiled, too, closed the Bible and took Henny's arm and stood beside her as Tom's six closest friends, three men and three women, each dressed in fool's garb, garish and gaudy

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and silly, pot-bellied, big-breasted, and a little stiff, a little lame, came out from the two doors on either side of the altar, and bore Tom's coffin out of the church.