

Leaf the Twenty-Sixth
A Churchyard Adventure
by John Williams

(I am indebted for the following to one of my oldest, and best friends, and I know every word of it to be strictly true. J. B.)

I WAS born among the green hills of Vermont. My father was a respectable farmer, and fully intended that I should be brought up to follow the plough. But I had a soul above corn and potatoes, and determined I would adopt some other means of obtaining a livelihood than the healthy unintellectual occupation of farming.

A simple incident soon decided me in the choice of my profession. I had a favorite dog which exhibited unmistakable symptoms of hydrophobia. I had him tied up and muzzled, but could not bear to have him killed. I looked into my father's library—a very small one, by-the-by—to see if I could find any book from which I could gain information what to do in the case. The only medical book we possessed was “Buchanan's Domestic Medicine.” I thought what was good for human beings would also be good for dogs, and eagerly turned it over to the article on hydrophobia. I read and became fascinated. Eureka! I had found it! Of course my dog died, but I was consoled for its loss in the treasure I had discovered. I perused, reperused, and almost committed to memory the whole of that work. I soon became perfectly at home in the symptoms, diagnosis, regimen and treatment of all diseases that flesh is heir to—of course I mean theoretically. However my determination was now taken, I would be a doctor and nothing else.

My father endeavored to reason me out of the notion. He painted to me in vivid colors all the hardships, discomforts and trials of a physician's life. But it was all to no purpose. It only served to make me more determined. My father, seeing all further opposition was useless, at last gave his consent, and in due time I was sent to Dr. Colburn, of Burlington, to read in his office.

Dr. Colburn was an Englishman who, however, had passed the greater part of his life in America. He had gathered together a large practice, and was very much liked by everyone who knew him. He had a fine library of books, and among them a large quantity of old English novels of the Minerva press school, written in that peculiar style so common to all works of imagination which deluged the country before Sir Walter Scott introduced a new era in novel writing.

I was always very fond of reading. I perused everything that came in my way, and this library was for me the land of promise. I was soon deep in the “Ruins of Rigonda,” or endeavoring to solve the “Mysteries of Udolpho.” I trembled over the “Three Spaniards,” and shuddered over the “Italian.” Old castles, ruined abbeys, spectres of murdered brides, and black-bearded villains with gleaming daggers in their hands were my constant companions. I began to grow nervous and timid. When night came, and I had retired to my own room, I peopled the darkness with hideous spectres, and sometimes fancied I could hear the death groan of some assassinated victim under my bed. This state of things at length grew so bad that it rendered me unfit for my studies. I then determined to break through the superstitious net by which I was surrounded. I shut up the novels, and endeavored to dissipate their effect by going into society. I succeeded in some measure in effecting my purpose.

One night, after I had retired to bed, I heard someone ringing violently at the office bell. Dr. Colburn had gone some miles in the country to see a patient, so it fell to my lot to answer the summons. I crept to the window and found a man before the door.

“What is it?” I asked.

“You must come and see Mr. Jenkins directly, he is very ill,” replied the messenger.

“Very well, I will be there in a few minutes,” I returned in no very good humor, for this Mr. Jenkins was an old patient of the doctor’s, and an unprofitable one too; he had never paid a cent in his life. Besides which, he was a hard drinker and had had several attacks of *delirium tremens*. I thought it very probable I might be detained there all night, as he was usually very violent when suffering from these attacks. I dressed myself hurriedly, and slipping a bottle of laudanum into my pocket, (opium is the best remedy for *delirium tremens*,) I made the best of my way to Mr. Jenkins’ dwelling.

He lived a short distance from town; and I confess some of my old superstitious feelings returned when I had left the lights of the town behind. I was not sorry when I stood before my patient’s residence.

In reply to my summons, an elderly woman opened the door, the moment she saw me she exclaimed:—

“Oh, Doctor, I am so glad you have come, for Mr. Jenkins is very bad indeed, worse than he has been yet.”

I followed the woman upstairs and entered the patient’s bedroom. A terrible sight met my gaze. The invalid was a raging maniac. He was sitting upright in bed, his countenance expressing intense alarm. His eyes were rolling in his head, and appeared to be very much injected. His hands trembled and picked at the sheets with convulsive grasps. The moment he saw me he glared at me like a tiger about to spring upon his prey.

“Back! back!” he cried, “I will not come! Will no one free me from this persecutor?”

“Hush!” whispered the woman, “it is the Doctor!”

“The Doctor?” he exclaimed, with a vacant stare. “Give me brandy—brandy, I say! The room is filled with serpents—they are hissing round the bed! Take them away! for God’s sake take them away!”

I approached the bed and took hold of his hand. “Your hand is ice—cold—cold!” said he with a shudder. “Ah! see that snake, it is coming here, keep it off!”

His raving increased, and he became very violent—requiring force to keep him in bed. After a time his physical powers began to fail. Just before his existence terminated he raised himself in his bed, and in a hollow voice shrieked out:—

“Fool that you are! I will haunt you after death!”

With these words he fell exhausted on the couch—a gurgling was heard in his throat—a convulsive spasm seized his limbs, and he was dead!

I returned home very much shocked with what I had seen. It was the first fatal case of *delirium tremens* I had ever beheld, and perhaps it would be impossible to find anything more appalling or horrifying to the feelings. The last words of the poor wretch made a deep impression on my mind, and I was haunted by them for several days.

About a week after this event, I was summoned to the chief hotel of the town to meet some college chums, who were on the road to Canada, and took advantage of passing through Burlington to spend the day with me.

I dined with them, and we passed what is called a jolly time—which means, that we drank a great deal more wine than was good for us, and acted as ill became rational beings. In the course of conversation, I related to my friends the particulars of Jenkins’ death, dwelling especially on the evil effects of intemperance, at the same time that I was certainly not practicing what I preached. By some turn of the conversation the subject of physical courage was introduced. The brandy had made me very eloquent.

“Well, for my part,” I exclaimed. “I think it all nonsense for anyone to be afraid. Nothing can be more unphilosophical than to indulge in so debasing a passion.”

One of my friends looked curiously at me, and replied:—

“Whereabouts is that Jenkins buried?”

“In Mount Clare Cemetery.”

“How far is that from the city?”

“About a mile.”

“Well, old fellow, I will bet you the price of a champagne supper that you dare not go at twelve o’clock tonight, stick a penknife in his grave and leave it there.”

“Nonsense,” I replied, “I should be robbing you.”

“Will you take up my bet?”

I was by this time in a state of demi-intoxication, and felt that I was equal to anything; therefore, without a moment's hesitation, I cried out, "Done!"

The moment the word had passed my lips I repented my foolish wager; but it was too late to retract. My friend looked at his watch; it was then half-past eleven. It was therefore time I should set out. It was agreed that I was to go to the grave and wait there till the cemetery clock struck twelve, with the last stroke I was to plunge my penknife into the grave and leave it there.

I took another large tumbler of brandy and water to keep up my courage, and started off on my foolhardy excursion.

Until the last house of the town was passed I got along very well, but when I reached the dark road leading to the cemetery my heart began to fail me. I whistled to distract my attention, I sang, I called out, but the only answer I received was a dull echo. It was no use. I felt my courage fast oozing away, but shame made me proceed.

I forgot to say it was a windy, blustering November night, and so dark I could scarcely see my hand before my face.

The moaning of the wind amongst the huge trees lining the road did not tend to reanimate me. I plodded on in a state of miserable, abject fear.

At length I reached the cemetery gate, and with a trembling hand swung open the massive portal.

Jenkins' grave was at the farther end of the cemetery, and I had, as it were, to walk through a whole city of graves before I reached it. How I got there I know not, for by this time I was completely unmanned, and my legs trembled under me as if they were afflicted with palsy. All the horrible incidents I had ever read in romances came back to my mind in the most vivid manner. I could just trace the forms of the white tombstones which lay in my path. Twenty times I transformed them into spectres, and fancied they were advancing toward me. More than once I turned my back to fly from the accursed spot; but a more powerful feeling than fear prevented me, namely, the dread of derision.

At last I reached the spot where the drunkard was buried. I could distinctly detect the form of the newly made grave. I pulled out my penknife and held it in my hand, ready to plunge it into the grave when the clock should strike twelve.

I do not know how long I waited; it appeared an age to me. All the time I was there the wind moaned and whistled round the old tombstones, as if interrogating me as to my business there.

Suddenly a sound vibrated through the air. I gave a start, and then, even in the midst of my fears, smiled at my folly. It was only the cemetery clock striking twelve. I waited until eleven strokes had been sounded, and while the last was still ringing I stooped down and plunged the penknife deeply in the brown earth. I then attempted to rise, but, great heavens! I was fixed—immoveable. A hoarse sound of mocking laughter rang through the cemetery, as if it proceeded from some being deriding me. Again I made the attempt—and again something held me back. I was dragged

down—down, until I lay all my length on the grave; I felt the cold earth against my face. The laughter was repeated; it was now distinct and perceptible, and grated in my ears. Perspiration poured from my brow like water, my hands trembled, and there was such an oppression about my heart that it appeared as if it must cease to beat. The last words of the miserable wretch came forcibly into my mind—“*Fool that you are, I will haunt you after death!*” It was true then, I was in his power, and spirits did revisit the earth.

While I lay down I no longer felt the invisible *thing* holding me. It must have relaxed its grasp. I began to reason with myself—could I have been deceived—was it simply a hallucination of my senses? As I asked myself these questions I began to gain a little courage. I cautiously got upon my knees and the blood began to return to my cheek, for no hand held me back now.

I remained in this position for a minute to collect my energies, and then made a movement to attain a standing posture—but oh! horror of horrors! the *thing* was holding me again. Yes—it was no dream—it was no hallucination—it was palpable, stern reality. The drag was steady, continuous—down—down again on the mound of earth which covered the body of the wretched drunkard. At this moment too the wind increased in violence; again the horrid laughter greeted my ear—it was even intensified in harshness. I could bear no more. I shrieked aloud in agony, and made desperate efforts to get free; but it was all in vain. Exhausted nature could hold out no longer—my energies failed me, and I sunk into a state of unconsciousness.

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How long I lay there, I know not; but when I came to myself it was broad daylight. I made a movement to get up, but found I was held fast as before. The daylight, however, gave me courage, and I began to look around me. A single glance convinced me there was no visible spirit at work. I began to examine the ground, and the mystery was explained to me in a moment. When I had thrust my penknife into the grave, I had also passed it through the lapel of my coat! The mocking laughter I had heard was also explained by a half broken branch hanging from a tree in the vicinity. The wind every now and then caught it in such a manner that it creaked and grated against the trunk of the tree.

I was thoroughly ashamed of myself for my fears, and arose up very much crest-fallen. I made the best of my way home, and the incident afforded me a lesson which I have never forgotten.

Leaves from the Note Book of a New York Detective: The Private Record of J. B. Ed. John Williams. Hartford: J. B. Burr, 1865.