

The Mad Philosopher

A Startling Adventure

From the Diary of a Physician

by Sylvanus Cobb, Jr.

I had been forced to confess to my wife, on that very morning, that I was alarmed; and she had once more urged it upon me that I should move back to our Eastern home; or, at all events that I should seek a settlement among civilized people, where she and our children could enjoy a few of the blessings of Christian society. But I told her to wait.

I had been settled in Hamilton not quite a year. In looking out a favorable location for one of my profession I had been governed by a consideration which my wife at first bitterly opposed. Instead of seeking a populous place, I cast about for a place which should give signs of future growth, meaning there to cast my lines and grow up with it. And Hamilton was such a place. With one of the best water-powers in the country; a pleasant location; a salubrious climate, soil of surpassing richness; upon the edge of a vast belt of the grandest timber that grew, the place could not but thrive. I had seen how other towns had grown up in that Western world, and I felt sure that Hamilton would grow likewise; and with that conviction upon me I settled down in the infant town, and notified the inhabitants that when they were sick I would minister unto them.

And now I can tell you why, on this morning, I had so flatly refused to leave the place. Within the eleven months I had spent there the population had more than doubled; two new mills had been put up; a wealthy party was negotiating for the building of a flouring mill; and at least a score of dwellings—poor ones, indeed; but nevertheless affording houses for honest men and women—had been erected. And then I was getting quite a practice; and, what was more, the people seemed to respect and trust me. I had not yet built a dwelling. When I removed to Hamilton I had money enough to buy a fine lot of land, and to erect thereon a small office; but not enough with which to add a house; so my wife and I concluded that we would hire a small tenement until I was able to put up such a dwelling as would suit us.

On that morning, after the conversation with my wife, I went to my office; and having thrown open the shutters, and dusted my chairs, and arranged my books and instrument cases, I sat down and took up the paper which I had brought with me from the house in my hand; and again I read the article which had been the occasion of our discussion.

Another physician murdered! Dear reader, do you remember the event? It is a time five-and-thirty years ago of which I write, and throughout our section of the West the excitement was intense. *Within less than four weeks five Physicians had been murdered in Jackson County!* and as yet no clue had been obtained to the murderer. They had all been shot through the brain! Two had been killed in their offices; one had been killed in a kitchen where he was eating alone at a table, having come home late at night, after the family had retired; one had been shot on the

highway, while returning on foot from a professional visit; and the last had been murdered in his bed!

The last victim, an account of whose death was in the paper before me, was Dr. Cornelius Verplank, a young man of about my own age, who had been settled in Middlecreek, only ten miles distance from Hamilton. He had been found, in the morning, by a servant who had gone to call him to see a patient, dead in his bed, with a bullet hole in his temple.

What could it mean? At first the supposition had been that these men had been murdered for their money; but two, at least, of the victims had no money, and the fourth—he who had been shot on the highway—had been left with a gold watch and a purse of money in his pocket; so, of course, plunder could not have been the object. But a hundred men were on the search,— every civil officer in the county, together with many volunteers,— and we hoped that the search might be successful. What clue the officers might have I did not know, though I supposed they must have gained something in the way of a guiding fact from so many bold and daring murders, especially since it was evident that they were all committed by one and the same person.

Who can wonder that I had begun to feel alarmed? A destroyer was on the track, and his course was toward myself. The map showed it plainly. First, Dr. Willerton, of Boonesborough—sixty miles away. Next, Dr. Allen, of Swinton, fifty miles away. Then fell my friend, John Howard, of Jackson Port, only thirty miles distant. And the scene of the last murder was only ten miles away! Yes—I was alarmed; and I had reason for it. There was method in this destruction of Physicians; and the hand that struck Dr. Verplank might next strike Dionysius Condyle. Why not? At all events, I owed it to myself to be prepared for an emergency; and first, I sought to provide myself with a brace of good pistols. I could not well afford to buy such a pair as I wanted just then; but I knew where I could borrow them; and I had arisen for the purpose of going out upon this errand, when the door of my office was unceremoniously opened, and a stranger entered.

“Good day, sir.”

“Ah—good day. This is Doctor Condyle?”

“I told him I was the individual, and at the same time offered him a chair. The chair, as I placed it, was at the end of my table; but he moved it around towards the door. It did not strike me then that he was placing himself between me and the door; but I had occasion to think of it afterwards.

The new-comer was a middle-aged man; not very tall, nor was he exceedingly stout, and yet he struck me as being the most powerfully muscular man I had ever seen. The surpassingly developed deltoids gave immense breadth to the shoulders, while the pectorals, correspondingly developed, gave fullness to one of those bosoms which can never be mistaken for weak ones. In short, he was a compact mass of bone and muscle, most surprisingly developed, even to the ends of his fingers. His head was large—very large—the frontal region being of uncommon fullness, and the upper portion, where phrenologists locate Firmness and Reverence, was remarkably high. The top of the head was entirely bald, and the skin had a thin, smooth, transparent look, as

though the skull beneath had swelled almost to bursting it. The hair which grew above the ears and floated down over the shoulders, was of exceeding fineness, slightly inclined to curl, and of a dark-brown color, untouched with gray. His beard was full and long; the cheek-bones prominent; the nose like an eagle's beak; and the eyes large, bright, and piercing. In fact, there was a brightness in those eyes entirely unnatural; and when he gazed full into my face I shuddered in spite of myself. About the man's dress there was nothing unusual, save that the shirt-collar was broad, and turned back over the collar of the coat, leaving the throat bare.

The most noticeable thing about him was the cane, or walking-staff, which he carried, and which he kept in hand when he sat down. It was very large, and apparently heavy, the lower two-thirds being straight and round, while the upper third was twisted and bent, with two or three enormous knobs on its sides, the whole being surmounted by a heavy cross-bar which served for a handle. At a little distance this staff appeared to be only one of those crazy, fantastic growths which are sometimes found in thick-tangled wildwood; but upon nearer view it was found to be a thing of art. The hand of man, with much labor, had fashioned it. I was a Yankee, and I meant to know what that staff had been made for before my visitor left. Or, at any rate, I meant to ask.

I told the man my name was Condyle, and I expected then that he would make known his business; but instead thereof he examined my person from top to toe, and then looked up at the bottles and boxes which contained my medicines—for you must understand that we had no drug-stores at hand in that section; and the necessity of keeping such a stock of medicines and chemicals on hand was one of the chief things that had prevented my building a dwelling.

“My dear sir,” said I, while he was still looking at the medicine-cases, “you have the advantage of me.” And I smiled and nodded.

“Eh?” said he, seeming not to comprehend.

“Your name,” said I—“I cannot call it.”

He looked at me with a look that puzzled me. It puzzled me because it had a volume of meaning which I could not understand.

“Do you believe,” said he, “that the Jew who caused the massacre of the Innocents, and who afterwards refused rest to Jesus Christ, when weary with bearing his cross, is still living upon the earth?”

He saw my look of wonder, and immediately added:

“Do not think that I claim to be that accursed man; but there are as few people who believe that I am still living as there are who believe that Cartaphilus is yet wandering about the earth. However, I have no objection to telling you my name. You have heard of PYTHAGORAS?”

I was not fully sure that the man was crazy, though it certainly looked very much like it; so I smilingly answered:

“I remember to have heard of but one Pythagoras.”

“And who and what was he?” demanded my visitor.

“He was,” said I, “the old Philosopher of Samos; the first Greek, I believe, who claimed to be a philosopher; and he was the founder of the first strictly secret society of which we have a positive record—a society which he founded in Italy, if I remember rightly.”

“Your memory serves you very well, young man,” said my strange visitor, a little stiffly. “And now,” he added, with a condescending smile, “I will enlighten you. *I am PYTHAGORAS!*”

“Are you really that old Greek philosopher?” I asked.

“I am,” he replied solemnly, “I was born at Samos five hundred and seventy years before Jesus Christ came upon earth in the human form. You may wonder and you may find it hard to believe, but if you held even a grain of my knowledge you would not be surprised at all.”

He spoke with the earnestness of perfect sincerity, and I knew that he was crazy; but I did not really fear him, though I was far from being crazy. He was evidently an educated man, and I had a curiosity to see what direction his madness would take. Of one thing, however, I was fully aware—and a blessed thing for me was it that I possessed this knowledge of human nature under its different phases: I knew if my philosopher was really mad, that I must fall in with his vagaries and not cross him in the least. Acting upon this understanding, I said:

“What you say, sir, does not surprise me so much as it interests me. But you will pardon me if I ask you with all solemnity, Are you, really and truly, Pythagoras of Samos—the disciple of Pherecydes of Syros, and also of Thales and Anaximander?”

“I am Pythagoras,” he answered, with a seriousness which left no room for doubt, “and though I cannot deny that I was once a dependent upon the vast learning of the sages whom you have mentioned, yet I so far outstripped them in philosophical lore that it sounds almost impious to hear myself mentioned as their disciple.”

Fully assured now that my visitor was mad, I determined to humor him to the extent of my power.

“I would like to know how your body had been preserved so long,” said I, “and also how it happened that I have never heard of your being alive before. I should have supposed that your presence on earth would have been the theme of universal comment among learned men.”

“My son,” he replied, with a light laugh, “the substance of your second question is an answer to your first. Do you remember what was the distinguishing doctrine of my philosophy?”

“Yes,” said I; “it was the doctrine of metempsychosis.”

“Exactly,” said he. “And in my presence here you have a clear demonstration of the truth of that philosophy. The transmigration of souls is as clearly a fixed fact as is the existence of matter. So you will see that I have not been moving about the earth in this same body all the while. When I left my first body at Metapontum, I passed into the form of a goat, and for eight years I wandered among the Apennines. Next I went into the body of an eagle, where I remained twenty years. And so I have lived on, having, during the hundreds of years since my soul first knew life, inhabited nearly every form of animal organism under the sun. The last was that of a tiger. I was hunted down by a party of *Shèkarees* in an Indian jungle, on the banks of the Ganges, and captured and brought to this country; and after being exhibited five years to the curious Americans, I passed out from the body of the tiger, and found myself once more in human form.”

I asked my visitor if he expected to go back into the form of a beast again.

“Yes,” said he; “and that transmigration of souls will go on until these human forms of ours become perfect.”

I did not quite understand, and asked him to explain.

“Here it is,” he said, darting at me a look that thrilled to my heart: “Nature is trying to perfect the human form; or, to suit your philosophy, I will say, God. The body of man was first made coarse and strong, of the same texture as the bodies of brutes; but, in time, they came to be finer and finer; and if God were not interfered with, He would, ere long, bring the human form to that standard required for immortality.”

“And what is it that interferes with this work?” I asked.

“I’ll tell you what it is!” he cried, stamping his foot and looking at me with an expression that made me quiver: “Don’t you think that God knows when it is time for people to pass from one body to another? Does not the Infinite One know when these human frames have been in use long enough, and when they should be laid away for a renewed growth? Do you not know, sir, that bodies buried in the earth, if laid away when God wills, only moulder to spring up into new and purer forms? Do you ask me what it is that interferes with the will of God? I saw a small dog lying upon the stone in front of the store just above here as I came along. If that dog could speak he would tell you that ‘twould have been better for him had he been born a dog in the first place. Did you know Dr. Cornelius Verplank?”

“Yes, sir,— he was a friend of mine.”

“The soul that once animated the body of Cornelius Verplank now gives life to the body of that dog; and he will no more interfere with the Infinite Will.”

“HE!” I gasped.

“Aye—HE!” pronounced the madman, now looking perfectly terrible. “When this poor human form began to droop and fade, showing plainly that God had done with it here, why did he put forth his hand and seek to stay the work of transmigration?”

“But,” I ventured, “you would not object to physicians saving the lives, or preserving the form, of little children?”

“Base Liar! What do you mean?” roared the madman. “Who saves the forms of children? When the spirit comes to call the soul of the child to some new form, that the beautiful body may be laid away in the earth to await the coming of the perfect day, you crowd in and, by your arts, defeat the spirit, and retain the body here, to grow old, and ugly, and deformed! If there is ever, in the time to come, to be a Heaven such as you talk about, does not God mean that there shall be little children there?—Sit still!” he commanded, as I started to move. “If you leave your seat you are a dead man!”

I could not move to save me. The man glared upon me with a fire blazing in those eyes that burned to my very soul, and for the moment a whelming flood of fear and dread rendered me utterly powerless. I had no doubt that this was the man who had murdered the five physicians; and he had now come to kill me. And he doubtlessly believed that he was doing God a service.

“Mind you,” he went on, after I had sank back into my seat, “in hastening the dissolution of your mortal body I do no murder. I only send your soul into some other form a little in advance of its time. But you cannot be permitted to remain here longer. I was sent back into this human body for the especial work of destroying the whole race of physicians from off the face of the earth. But you need not fear, sir. You will experience no pain. I shall send a leaden ball directly through your brain, so that you will feel no hurt. Within the chambers of this gun is compressed as much atmospheric air as would fill two rooms like this in which we sit. It is wonderful, sir. There will be no report—no sound of any kind. Upon my soul, you ought to thank me—you had, indeed. I thus save you all the pain of dying, and perhaps in an hour from this time you may be a free and happy bird, sailing over the forests and prairies. O! I was very happy when I was a bird. I was in Africa then—”

At this point I broke in upon him. I had become as calm as ice, and as rigid. I had seen it all. That monstrous staff was a curiously constructed air-gun, and I knew from the way in which he held it that it was ready for discharging. He had only to touch the trigger to do it. And I knew, too, that any motion on my part would be fatal, for that gun could be pointed and discharged in the fourth part of a second. My life was the prize, and my wits worked smartly. I called to mind all that I had learned of insanity during my study, and in my reading since; and my course of action was quickly resolved upon. Luckily my nerves were steady, and luckily, too, I had faith in the result. My madman was a philosopher, and he had probably entered into a discussion with me which he had not granted to the others. If he thought I had no wish to escape he would probably listen to anything that promised light in his peculiar fancies. I broke in upon him by gently raising my hand towards him, and saying, with a smile:

“My dear Pythagoras, let me interrupt you one moment. But first, answer me one question,—and answer me truly: Must I die?”

“What men call dying—yes,” he said, relaxing from his fierceness, and regarding me with a curious look.

“Then,” I continued, leaning towards him, and speaking as calmly and interestedly as ever I spoke in my life—for a power outside and above my own seemed to sustain me—“listen to me. I have something of the utmost importance to communicate. Have you ever read the great work of Abbe Geoffry de Saint Dizier on the subject of the Transmigration of Souls?”

“No,” said he, reflecting, “I never heard the name.”

“He was a French philosopher and writer,” I explained, “and I am very sure that he offered it as a source of consolation to parents who had lost young children, that God and the angels wanted children in heaven.”

“Exactly!” cried the madman, his face brightening. “That is the true philosophy.”

“But,” said I, “that is not all. He professes to have discovered how a man, at the point of dissolution, can elect what sort of a body his spirit shall next inhabit. The thing is simple, and I remember that it struck me as being very sensible.”

“But that is a valuable discovery,” cried my visitor, eagerly.

“It appears to me to be of incalculable value,” I returned.

“Have you the work now?” he asked.

“Yes,” I told him. “It is in my library.”

“Where?”

“Directly over your head, sir?”

“My soul! we will look it over. Will you get it?”

Upon the broad shelf above the books were a number of heavy surgical instruments, and with them was a large iron monkey wrench. I moved my chair to the book-case, and stood upon it, and the madman arose and came up by my side. I had not counted upon his getting up; but I quickly saw my chance. Upon my table was a small feather duster.

“My dear Pythagoras,” said I, “the dust is so thick upon these books that I can hardly read their titles. Will you hand me that duster on my table?”

He turned, and on the instant I grasped the iron wrench and leaped down upon him. I was not particular where I struck, nor how—particular as to care for him, I mean. I only thought of my own life, and made sure that the blow should settle him. And it did. I struck him full upon the enormous bump of veneration with the flat side of the head of the wrench, and he fell to the floor like a dead man. Quick as thought I was by his side, and having rolled him over upon his face, I

brought his arms together behind his back, and there lashed them with a stout piece of packing-cord, which chanced to be at hand.

My next movement was to seize his staff, and rush out of doors, where I soon succeeded in calling together half a dozen of my friends, and as we returned to my office I briefly told them the story of my adventure.

We found the philosopher still insensible; but a copious application of cold water soon brought him back to consciousness, and when he realized that he was captured, and that his secret was gone from him, and that the air-gun was to be his no more, he covered his face with his hands, and groaned and wept in agony. I had expected to see him rave and tear, but he did no such thing; nor did he rave at all during all the time I was with him. He seemed only sad and disheartened that he could not carry out his work.

The citizens, when they knew that we had caught the murderer of the physicians, were for lynching him; and they would certainly have done it if I had not made them understand that he was a poor maniac, wholly irresponsible for his acts.

Touching our man's real name, or whence he came, we could only get from him that his name was Pythagoras, and that only a few months before he had worn the form of a Bengal tiger. But we had advertised him, and in the course of a few weeks three gentlemen arrived from New Orleans, and recognized my mad philosopher as a Mr. Payson Armitage, who had escaped from their asylum three months before, where he had originally been confined on account of this same hallucination. The first development of his mania had been the manufacture of his air-gun, though no one imagined what his plan was until it was finished, and he had confidentially let out the secret to his wife. At that time he was placed under restraint before he had done any mischief.

Armitage had been in confinement about six months when he made his escape. He had gone to his old home at night, and worked his way into the house without disturbing any of the inmates, and having secured his air-gun, he had stolen out, and made off.

Six months subsequent to my adventure, I learned that Payson Armitage was dead. He had died with brain fever. It is not impossible that my hand helped that fever on, though there was plenty of other cause in the character and directions of his mental disease.

The air-gun is still mine, and a wonderful piece of mechanism it is; and very peculiar are the reflections which occupy my thoughts when I take it out from its resting-place to exhibit it to my friends.

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