

An Unexpected Change of “Subjects”

by Judge Clark

We were all three medical students—Ned Williams, Charley Barker, and myself.

We had reached a point in our studies at which the possession of an anatomical “subject” became an important desideratum. But how to get one, there was the rub. Very few people died in Ploddersdale, and as those who did were mostly patients of our worthy preceptor, “the Doctor,” upon we depended to act as “Demonstrator,” and who, we were sure, would never consent to “go back,” in death, on those who had trusted him in life, the difficulties in the way of attaining our object seemed well-nigh insuperable.

But at last an opportunity offered. A man without friends or known relatives was to be hanged for murder. By means of a little well-bestowed flattery, and the promise of our votes for a second term, we succeeded in ingratiating ourselves with the Sheriff; and finally, after a good deal of persuasion, induced that official to promise us the convict’s body at the earliest practical moment after the breath should be out of it; not but we could have secured our prize anyhow—for there was Tim. Brady, the Doctor’s man, who, for what he would have called a “reasonable *picayunery* consideration,” stood ready to place his national proficiency in the use of the spade at our disposal any hour of the day or night. But with a view to certain contemplated galvanic experiments, it was desirable to obtain possession of the subject before *rigidity* set in; and *that* could only be done through the cooperation of the sheriff.

The arrangement made, and our honor pledged to keep it a secret, we were, from time to time, singly and together, admitted to visit the prisoner, in whom we began to feel a sort of proprietary interest.

The more we saw of him the better we liked him. A well-developed, trim-built fellow, in the prime of life—for our purpose, and from our standpoint, he was perfect. To have heard us, after each visit of inspection, reckoning up his points and explaining what advantage he would *cut up*, would have made your unprofessional flesh creep.

There was nothing indicative of malignity or viciousness in the condemned man’s appearance, and yet the deed whereof he stood convicted was one of the most cold-blooded atrocities. An old man of eccentric habits and great wealth, by whom he was employed as a domestic—the two living alone together—was found one morning murdered in his bed.

The prisoner was missing, but was subsequently apprehended with a considerable sum in his possession, and visible traces of blood on his garments. He strenuously denied the murder, but admitted having stolen the money, his story being something like this:

He had been aroused from his sleep by loud groans, apparently proceeding from his master’s chamber: on reaching which, after hurrying on his clothes, he found the latter lying on the floor weltering in his blood.

He raised the wounded man in his arms and laid him on the bed, but in a few moments life was extinct. Almost immediately the thought flashed upon him that the murder would be laid to him. The blood which had gotten upon his garments, and the fact that the deceased and himself were the sole inmates of the house, he felt would be accepted as conclusive proofs. His only safety, he believed, lay in flight. But for that, money was necessary. He knew where his master's was kept, and having appropriated sufficient for his purpose, he started on a race for life, in which, like many another, he failed to win.

This account seemed incredible enough, and probably would have availed the prisoner but little, even had the law, instead of closing his mouth, permitted him to tell his own story. As it was, there was nothing to perplex the jury. They might have rendered their verdict without leaving the box, though they *did* leave it, for form's sake. It was "*Guilty*," of course.

On the morning of the execution we attended in a body, the sheriff having given us tickets of admission. We took an affecting leave of the prisoner—less affecting, perhaps, than it would have been, had we not known how soon we were to meet again.

On the scaffold our man behaved admirably. In fact, we were quite proud of him. He listened to the death warrant with respectful attention; joined devoutly in the prayers of the clergyman; made a neat little speech, protesting his innocence and thanking his friends—here he looked at Charley, Ned, and myself—and then told the Sheriff he was ready.

The noose was adjusted, the cap drawn down, the bolt drawn, and with a heavy "*thud*"—I believe that's the reporters' word—the trap and its burden fell.

In less than an hour we had "come into our property," which Tim. dumped from a sack on to the dissection table we had improvised in the Doctor's back office, while the crowd were following a rough coffin filled with brick-bats and old newspapers to its last unhonored resting-place.

"Now for the battery!" cried Charley, eager to begin.

The plates were immersed, the wires attached, the circuit completed—whereof the body formed a part—and the acid began to *siz*.

The effect was electrical in more than one sense. The "subject" opened its eyes, drew several quick, convulsive breaths, struck out briskly with its legs and arms, and finally kicking over the apparatus, sprang to its feet! It is not going too far to say it was the liveliest kind of a corpse.

"I tell you, gentlemen," it began, Tim. blessing himself the while, and the rest of us staring in amazement, "I am not guilty of this murder, but I think I know who *is*."

The fellow was evidently laboring under the delusion that he was still alive and addressing the spectators from the scaffold, for which the table on which he stood might well have been mistaken.

Just before the drop fell, the prisoner, we remembered, had made a movement as though there was something more he desired to say; but the Sheriff, in his trepidation, had failed to observe it, and at that instant the trap gave way. The gentleman was evidently disposed to embrace the present opportunity to resume the thread of his discourse.

“I think I know who *is* guilty,” he continued. “It’s my solemn belief, and these are my dying words, that it is no other than Bob Rickey, the murdered man’s nephew, who fell heir to his property.”

Electricity, we knew, could work wonders. Charley Barker believed it was the vital principle itself, which was the reason why people were so *thundering* wicked. But even *he* could hardly give it credit for *all* the present phenomena. The fact was, loth as we were to admit it, the man had come to life and put in a claim to his own carcass.

What to do with him was the next question. His exact legal *status* was a knotty point. Had the law further claims upon him, or would the sheriff’s return that he had hanged the prisoner by the neck till his body was dead, operate as an *estoppel*?

At last we concluded it could do no harm to wait till night, and try the effect on Bob Rickey, whose complicity in his uncle’s murder had been by many more than suspected, of a ruse suggested by Ned Williams, the details of which were soon settled.

About bedtime we repaired to our resuscitated friend, “accoutred as he was,” and properly instructed, to the house in which Rickey, who was a bachelor, lived alone.

Charley accompanied the late deceased to the door, and when it opened in response to the bell, stood aside and allowed his companion to enter *solus*.

Ned Williams and myself took our station at a window of the sitting room, into which Rickey conducted his visitor and in which a light was burning. The outside shutters were closed, but the sash curtains were up, and we had no difficulty in hearing and seeing, through the open slats, all that passed within.

Once fairly in the light, our confederate threw aside the cloak that enveloped him, and stood revealed as he had come to our hands out of Tim.’s sack—his arms pinioned, the unsightly cap on his head, and the rope dangling from his neck.

Rickey uttered a loud shriek, and staggered to the wall. The best actor that ever played Hamlet never, in the ghost scene, pictured terror as we then beheld it. The poor wretch shivered like one in an ague, and through his chattering teeth begged, prayed, conjured, and confessed, till there was no longer a doubt left that the wrong man had been hanged.

The upshot of the matter was, that another execution took place some months afterward, and though the sheriff declined to enter into a new arrangement, thanks to Tim., we got hold of the body, and while Bob Rickey made but an indifferent “subject” compared with the first, and was

far less sensitive to electrical influence, he possessed the advantage of not coming to life on our hands.

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