A Post-Mortem Discovery

A Scrap from a Physician's Diary

By Sylvanus Cobb, Jr.

NOTE—"Upon one condition," said Dr. Lord, as I sat in his cozy study with his Diary open before me. "I am perfectly willing that you transcribe for the Ledger whatever of interest you can find in my journal; but you must not put the names in print as you find them. Whatever is opened to me in my capacity as physician becomes a secret which I have no right to divulge. I could have wished that my own name might have remained unknown; but since you exposed it in your story of 'The Penknife Blade,' you may as well let it go. But remember—the identity of my patients must be religiously concealed under assumed names. Of course you comprehend and appreciate."

"Certainly," said I. And when I had assured the old amputating and dissecting Trojan that I would be very careful, he allowed me to carry his ponderous journal away with me; and here is what I found among the records:

THE PHYSICIAN'S STORY

It was in November—the thirteenth—that Dr. Turner sent for me to meet him in consultation upon a case in B—. On the following day I answered the summons. B— was fourteen miles distant from my residence, and when I reached the place designated I found Turner already there, and with him was Dr. Prescott, of S—. Our patient was a man of about sixty, named Ebenezer Varney. He was a farmer by occupation, though of late years he had turned his attention particularly to stock-breeding and money-lending. He had been fortunate in his speculations, and was what, in the country, is considered wealthy. Until within three months Mr. Varney had known nothing of sickness. According to his own account he had "never known a sick day until this trouble came." He was a large-framed man, and Turner, who had known him for years, assured me that a man more hale and hearty than he had previously been was not to be found anywhere.

"And now," said I, "what is the case as you have had it?"

"Here it is," replied Turner; "I was called to see the patient during the last week of August. I found him weak and languid; with no appetite; the pulses low and sluggish; and the tissues seeming to be gradually, but surely, wasting. There was no fever, and he had complained of but little pain. At first I thought it might be a case of dyspepsia; but I was very soon forced to believe that there was something deeper than that. There was a suspension of the whole alimentary power, as though the organs had suddenly failed, as an old watch will that has been run a long time without lubrication—simply worn out. He had been a hard-worker; exposed to all sorts of weather; careless of his health; and eating everything that came in his way. My treatment has been rather varied. I tried the different preparations of iron at first, with such alternatives and tonics as I thought he would bear. Of late, however, my course has been almost entirely experimental; and I think I may safely say that I have exhausted the whole pharmacopoeia. But all to no effect. The

waste goes on, like poison eating into the vitals, and I have no power to stop it. I am free to confess that I am stuck. I have told these honest people, who are so anxious to know what ailed him, that the trouble was paralysis of the alimentary canal. Of course I must give them a direct answer, and that came as near to my knowledge of the case as anything."

"And," said I, "a very good statement it is. But if there is a paralysis of the canal, what caused it?"

I found the patient, as the reader might suppose from Turner's account, to be very weak, very pale, very despondent, very thin, and exceedingly reduced in every way. It was a case of atrophy for which we could find no cause. We summoned the cook and the nurse, and demanded to know if Mr. Varney ever ate or drank anything in the house which the others did not partake. No—he had never been notional about his food. Whatever the others eat or drank he eat and drank.

And how about his medicine? The nurse declared that he only took what the doctor ordered. And how had it been with Mr. Varney's progenitors? Had they been healthy?

"No, sir. His father and his grandfather, and I've hearn tell how't his great-grandfather did, too—all died with consumption. I've hearn Adam's Aunt Hepsey say 'at they grew to be middle-aged men afore anything like sickness ever showed itself; but when they once was took down they went awful."

I turned, and beheld a woman of middle-age—a small, keen-eyed, restless woman, who proved to be the wife of the sick man's nephew, Adam Varney.

And by and by Adam Varney himself came in, and he corroborated his wife's testimony. He was a man not far from fifty years of age, rather slim and frail; and it struck me that he, too, might be taken down before a great while.

Altogether the case was a very curious one; but we were forced to pronounce it quick consumption; and we could offer no hopes of recovery. There is no need of telling all that we three doctors said. I will only further add that the last words I spoke on the subject were to Turner.

"Doctor," said I, "there is one thing that confounds me; and for an elucidation of that condition you must exert yourself to the utmost. Find out, if you can, what causes the continual, deadly nausea. It is beyond my power to conceive of any cause inherent in the system."

Our report to the patient, and to his friends, was, that Dr. Turner was pursuing the proper course of treatment; and that he understood the case as clearly as it could be understood from the symptoms.

That was the fourteenth of November. During the two or three weeks following I was very busy, and gave but little thought to the case at B—. Thanksgiving week I spent with my relatives in Connecticut, and on my return I found about as much business on my hands as I could attend to. I heard nothing further from Dr. Turner, and the case of Ebenezer Varney finally passed from my mind.

About the middle of December three young gentlemen, who were studying medicine, came over from Hampton, they having arranged with two students of mine that they would club together and send to New York for a subject, and I should meet with them a certain number of afternoons and act as their demonstrator. Edgar Sterns and Charles Gordon were my students; and Gordon had a place fixed up in an out-of-the-way end of his mother's wood-shed that answered capitally for a dissecting-room. It had been originally parted off and finished for a shop; but of late years it had only been used as a tool house. Here the young men had dug a pit under the floor; had arranged a good table; and had furthermore closed up the single window, and set a broad sky-light in the roof.

It was during the week before Christmas that my students told me they were ready. I asked them if their subject had come from New York.

"Never mind," said Gordon. "We've got one."

"Has it been *raised* about here?" I asked a little uneasily.

"No," they both said, in a breath. "It came from a place a long distance from here."

"Very well," said I. "I'll be with you this afternoon."

And that afternoon I went. The *cadaver* lay upon the table, covered with a large blanket, and in the small stove was fire enough to make the place comfortable, without producing enough heat to endanger the tissues of the subject, some of which they might wish to keep two or three weeks, if possible.

"We aren't over and above pleased with our purchase, doctor," said Gordon, as I moved towards the table after having warmed my hands. "We expected a little better subject than this. However—it's better than nothing." And as he spoke, he threw off the blanket, leaving the *cadaver* fully exposed.

I shook my head with disappointment. A more attenuated body I had never seen. It seemed as though a skeleton, with a single integument drawn over it, was all there was before us.

"I declare, boys, you'll get but little idea of the development of the tissues from this affair. You'll find the tendonous connections intact, and may be you'll find—"

"What's up, doctor?" asked Gordon, as I came to this sudden stop. "Is it anybody you knew?"

Up to the moment of his question I had recognized nothing; but as the last word dropped from his lips the truth flashed upon me.

"I swathe man once," I said. "I was called in consultation upon his case five or six weeks ago. He lived in B—; and his name was Ebenezer Varney."

"What!" exclaimed one of the young gentlemen from Hampton—"Old Varney, the Drover? Mercy! couldn't all his gold keep more flesh than this on his bones! Yes—I know him know. It is the old fellow himself; and here's the end of the wealth he's been heaping up so carefully and so persistently!"

"Doctor! —Doctor Lord!" cried Stearns, "what do you find in the face that binds you so?"

'Gentlemen," said I, having made an end of the reverie into which I had fallen, "I was thinking of that consultation that I told you of. There was something very blind in this man's case, and I am determined now to investigate. Mr. Gordon, you will of course wish to overhaul and remove the abdominal viscera first; so I will thank you if you will take the knife and give me the stomach and bowels as soon as you can."

"Eh! What's up now?"

"Ask me no questions. You shall know all in good time."

I may as well state the case plainly at this point as any other. From the first I had held strong doubts concerning the character of Ebenezer Varney's disease. It did not look to me like consumption. That terrible nausea of which the sufferer complained—which affected him continually—was not an attendant upon any form of consumption. I suspected poison. And I knew of but one poison that could be administered without the patient's knowledge, and which could produce such atrophy as was present in this case,—and that poison was—*Antimony*—probably the *protoxide*.

It is not my purpose here to enter into a detailed account of the manipulations necessary to the result I had in view. Suffice it for me to say that in the end we had a thick ring of metallic antimony in the tube of the apparatus, showing clearly that this poison had been freely administered; and from the quantity obtained it struck me that towards the last the doses had been increased.

Having pledged my students to secrecy, I told them the story of my visit to Mr. Varney, and then gave them a lecture upon the nature of antimony as a poison. They had no doubt read on instances of slow poison, where the fatal potion had been administered in minute doses, gradually destroying life—and so gradually that the patient seemed to be dying of lingering disease; and they might have supposed that said slow poison was some wonderful invention, akin to the concoctions of those famous alchemists of olden times. But simple protoxide of antimony would do the work as well as anything yet found in the

whole range of toxicology. And, furthermore, an expert might have administered the poison so that but little, if any, traces could have been found; but in this case the prisoner was evidently in a hurry.

And that is all that the reader cares to know of the mortal body of the poisoned man; only I will say that I found the man who furnished the *cadaver*, and from my own pocket I paid a goodly sum to return the remains to the place whence he took them.

As soon as I could do so I called upon Dr. Turner, and asked him about his patient in B—.

"Poor fellow!" said Turner. "He hung on some time after our consultation; but I could do nothing for him. It was evidently a case of galloping consumptions."

"Did you hold a post-mortem?"

"No. I wanted to; but his friends wouldn't allow it. They couldn't bear the idea of having his body cut up so."

"He left considerable property, didn't he?"

"Yes—sixty thousand dollars, the administrators say; but it is more than that."

"Who are his heirs?"

"His nephew is his only heir—Adam Varney. You saw him when you were there."

"And I saw his wife, too?" I said.

"Yes," replied Turner. "She nursed the old man through his entire sickness; only once in a while Mrs. Downing came in to relieve her."

"Who is this Mrs. Downing?"

"A widow living close by Varney's residence,—Mary Downing is her name; and she is one of the finest women I ever knew. She expected that Mr. Varney would have left her something by his will; but it seems he made none. Or. At least, no will has been found."

"Was the widow related to Varney?"

"No. But she would have been, though, had he lived; for he was planning to take her for his wife."

"Are you sure of this?"

“Certainly. The old man told me himself. You must remember that he was a hale and hearty man before this sickness came upon him.”

“Egad! Ebenezer’s death was a fortunate thing for Mr. Adam Varney and wife.”

“You may well say so. It saved them sixty thousand dollars, at least.”

I said nothing to Turner of the post-mortem which it had been my privilege to hold; but after conversing with him a while upon other matters I took my leave, and called next at the residence of Adam Varney, and was fortunate enough to find that individual at home. He and his wife both remembered me as one of the physicians who had been present at the consultation on their uncle’s case, and they professed to be glad to see me.

Now there was no earthly reason why they should have been glad to see me, especially before I had told them what my business was; and I could see very plainly that they were not glad. It was an instinct with them to keep on the right side of a man who had wondered what made their old relative sick. I told them that I had called to make some inquiries concerning the sickness of Ebenezer Varney. This was the first opportunity I had found since his death, and I had embraced it.

I had been conducted into the parlor, which was warmed by a furnace, and we three were alone together.

I told them I hoped they would excuse me for troubling them.

O—it was no trouble. They were very glad I had come. It was pleasant to see anyone who had tried to be of service to their poor dear uncle.

And Mrs. Adam Varney wiped her eyes with the corner of her apron.

I very quickly saw that Adam Varney was a guilty man. He showed it in every look and every motion. But I saw that Mrs. Adam—otherwise Nancy Varney—was the demon of the establishment. Her husband looked towards her with an appealing, wailing expression, seeming to say unto her,—“For God’s sake, save me! You have dragged me down; don’t let them trample upon me!”

And she in turn seemed to say,—“Don’t be a fool. Keep up your courage. They can’t prove anything.”

I led them on from step to step, until I had gained from them a thorough account of their uncle’s sickness and death; and during this time the husband paled and trembled a great many times, while the wife talked as calmly and coolly as could be, save when she was straining out a few tears, and wiping them away.

At length I folded my arms upon my bosom, and looked the man steadily in the face. When he met that gaze he quivered like an aspen, and I caught the half angry, half imploring, look and gesture which his wife directed towards him.

"Adam Varney," said I, with slow and stern solemnity, "I am not an avenging spirit. '*Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord!*' For myself, I regard the man who bears upon his soul the memory of a great crime as a sufferer to be pitied; and when I felt assured that he would commit no crime like unto it, I might not deliver him into the hands of the law. Let us suppose a case: Suppose a man—aye, suppose YOU—had committed a murder—Ah—are you ill?"

"Doctor Lord," cried the wife, in spiteful accents, "what do you mean by coming here and talking such stuff? My husband is a poor, weak, nervous man, and such talk as that always unmans him. He never could read about murders in the papers without going into spasms."

"Then, madam," said I, as coolly as possible, "I will direct my remarks to you."

"I don't want to hear them!" she exclaimed.

"But you MUST hear them. You had better hear them, than that I should go out from here and *speak them to another*."

"Really, doctor, you are very funny. I almost think you are crazy."

"And what do you think?" I demanded of Adam.

The man started, as though from a horrid dream, and stared at me wildly.

"Who—who—what—are you?" he gasped.

"I am one who has come to demand justice!" I replied. And then, turning to the woman, I added:

"Nancy Varney, I say unto you—your hands are red with blood!"

She sank back into her chair, and the color fled from her cheeks. She sank down as though she had been stricken a heavy blow. A few seconds so, and then she started once more to life.

"Fool! Madman! Liar!" she yelled. "You have some base purpose in trying to frighten me! But you cannot do it."

"You mistake, Madam," I said, calmly and smilingly. "I have no thought of frightening you. But, on the contrary, I seek to restore you to a state less painful and dreadful than the

one you are now in. Listen to me, and I will tell you what I would have you do. But first answer me this: Did your uncle Ebenezer leave a will?"

"No!" she cried, vehemently. "He left no such thing. He never made a will. He never thought of making a will. If anybody says he made a will, that body lies! There, sir! That's what I've got to say about a will!"

"And now," I pursued, 'I would have you hearken to a proposition which I have to make: on the morrow your husband will go to those whom the Court have appointed to administer upon your uncle's estate, and he will say unto them—"Gentlemen, I cannot bear a lie upon my conscience. I cannot enjoy a property which is not properly my own. I know it was my uncle's wish that twenty thousand dollars of his money should be given to Mrs. Mary Downing. He also wished that five thousand dollars should be given to each of the three children of his brother's widow—the children which were born to her after she married her second husband. They are now orphans, and he loved them dearly. He furthermore desired that ten thousand dollars should be given to the church of which he was so long a member; and that the rest of his property, after paying his debts, should be safely invested by the administrators, the proceeds therefrom to be used for the education of such friendless orphans and the children of poor parents, residents in his native town, as may be deemed worthy of the assistance.' And he will say unto them further, that for himself, and his wife Nancy, he claims only the house in which they now live, his uncle intending that he should own it."

The woman gazed at me in blank amazement; but before she could speak, I continued:

"If your husband will do this I will pledge myself that I will never divulge the dreadful secret which has come to my knowledge. I know how, day by day, you gave that poor, confiding old man the poison that destroyed his life. I know how you mixed the antimony with the drink you gave him—how you changed the medicine of the physician into a deadly draught; and how you saw your uncle wasting away—wasting—wasting—wasting—his strength failing, and his life ebbing,—saw him suffering from the effects of the fatal drug,—and yet you continued to administer it. Oh Adam Varney—"

Until that moment the man had sat like one upon whom some stunning blow had fallen—sat gazing upon me with a stare almost idiotic,—but as I thus spoke his name, he started to his feet, evidently forgetful of everything save the picture of his dying uncle and of the accusation I had laid upon him. His lips were colorless; his cheeks blanched; his eyes glaring wildly, as eyes glare when one has suddenly discovered a ghost in the solemn gloom; and his fingers where clutched in the bosom of his shirt.

"By the great God that made me!" he yelled, "you lie when you say that to me! I never harmed my uncle—never, never, never! I never gave him any antimony; and I never hatched up the thing for anybody else to do. I never gave him anything while he was sick. He'd tell ye so, if he was living. He'd tell ye it wasn't me!"

I would be utterly impossible for me to describe the looks with which Mrs. Varney regarded her husband as he thus spoke. Suffice it for me to say, that the spirits of rage, mortification, disgust, hatred, fear, agony, spite, and vindictiveness, possessed her soul by turns. Nancy's direct confession could not have strengthened my belief; for I already simply KNEW that she had done the murder. I furthermore knew from information derived from Dr. Turner, that the money which Eben. Varney had left was all in the bank. Indeed, everything, save the real estate, was present at the bank. One of the administrators was the cashier of the institution, and for safe-keeping all the papers—bonds, mortgages, notes, deeds, and conveyances of every description—had been placed in his strong vault.

Having arrived at this point I determined to make quick work of it. So, while the woman was still glaring at her husband, I arose to my feet, and took my hat; and as they looked to see what this movement meant, I said to them:

"Dr. Turner does not yet know of this thing. It is known at present only to myself and to a few gentlemen who assisted me in the investigation. For one week we will keep the secret to ourselves, and if, at the end of that time, you have disposed of the property as I have dictated, I give you my word that you shall be permitted to live with only such punishment as your own consciousnesses may bring upon you. And God knows, that punishment will not be light. If, however, at the end of the week you shall not have done as I have bidden, then I shall turn your case over into the hands of the officers of the law. Here is a written list of the bequests as I gave them to you,—so you can make no mistake; (and here I threw the scrap of paper upon the table.) Now go and do as I have said; and be sure you cannot obtain a dollar from the bank without my knowledge."

"You—you—can't prove it! You can't prove it!" the woman shrieked, as I moved toward the door.

I stopped, and turned, and met her gaze.

"Nancy Varney," I said, "your dead uncle is the witness I shall bring against you!" And with this I departed.

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Five days later I was in the town of B— again, and I made it in my way to call upon Dr. Turner; and in the course of conversation he said to me,—

"By the way, Lord, those Varneys have done a curious thing. They have been to the administrators, and have, of their own free will, declared that it was their uncle's dying request that of his property twenty thousand dollars should be given to Mary Downing; fifteen thousand to the children of his brother's widow; ten thousand to the old church; and that the rest should be safely invested for the benefit of the poor and friendless children of the town; reserving to themselves only the estate upon which they have lived. Curious, isn't it?"

“It is curious,” I admitted. And then I asked him what people thought it meant.

“Well,” said he, “the general impression is, that the old man left a will to this effect, and that they destroyed it; and their troubled consciousnesses have led them to the course they have taken.”

“And what will the officers do?” I asked.

“They have concluded to dispose of the property as has been thus suggested, and ask no further questions.”

In the spring I saw Dr. Turner again, and he told me the Varneys had sold their property in B—, and gone out West.

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