

# *The Pen-Knife Blade*

A LEAF FROM A SURGEON'S DIARY

by Sylvanus Cobb, Jr.

Some very strange and curious things happen in this world; and he who would deal in the marvelous, need not go out from the field of facts. "Truth is stranger than fiction," is an old and common saying, though I could never see much sense in it, since all proper fiction is but the reflex of truth. In fact, they go hand in hand, and one is just as strange as the other. The man who originated the saying had probably found some truth which was so strange, that he feared people would hesitate to believe it, so he claimed that the strangest kind of stories were the true ones. Now, I have a story to tell, which I am sure will be held by the reader as both strange and curious; and such, in fact, it is; and it is true—every word of it. Concerning names and dates, I must be a little reticent, wherefore you will see when you read what I have to tell.

One cold, blustering evening in mid winter, I was seated before my cheerful fire, with my book in my hand—a medical magazine—engaged in reading an account of a curious operation which had lately been performed by Valentine Mott. I had come to an uncut page, and was looking for my paper-cutter, when my wife, who sat at the opposite side of the stand, remarked to me that Harriet Roberts had been to see her that afternoon, and that she wished to come and work in our family.

"Harriet Roberts wants to work in our family!" I cried, with much astonishment.

I thought my wife must be mistaken; but she said it was as she had stated. The girl had actually called upon her, and was desirous of finding a home with us.

I will tell you why I was surprised:

In other years, Selden Roberts had been one of my warmest and most intimate friends. He was a man of wealth and refinement, and had done much to assist me when I needed assistance. It was he who lent me two thousand dollars when I had the opportunity to purchase the valuable library and anatomical preparations of a deceased surgeon. Selden Roberts died, leaving a wife and one child. This child was the girl, Harriet, of whom I have made mention. After remaining a widow for some years Mrs. Roberts married a second husband—a man named Herman Parkhurst. He was what might be called a handsome man, though he was always repulsive to me; and I wondered much how Worthy Roberts could have given him her hand. But he was a well-built, dashing fellow, ready with his tongue; always dressed in style, and a general favorite among a certain class of ladies. Still, I don't know as there was much to wonder at in the widow's choice. She was not a strong-minded woman, and Parkhurst evidently worked his way to her confidence and esteem by careful flattery. However, she became his wife, and at the end of three years she died. She had been buried, I think, only three days when the event of Harriet's visit, already referred to, occurred. After marrying with Herman Parkhurst, she had removed to an adjoining

town, so I had seen little of her. If they had had any sickness in their family, they had employed a physician of their own place, as they never called upon me.

Intelligence of Mrs. Parkhurst's death reached me on the day after it occurred. I had occasion to ride over into that town to visit a patient, and where I stopped they were conversing upon the subject of her disease. There was something strange about it—so strange, that I did not trust the story of the friends of my patient, but went to see the physician who had attended Mrs. Parkhurst's family. From him I learned that Mrs. Parkhurst had been confined to the house for some days previous to her death by a severe cold, but that she had shown no symptoms of any further disease. Said he, as nearly as I can recollect:

“I called upon her on Tuesday evening, and found her, as I supposed, improving. Her bowels seemed to be in a perfectly natural state, and scarcely any febrile symptoms were perceptible. I left her no medicine, save a few innocent powders, which were more for the purpose of leading her to think that I was helping her than for any effect they could produce. On the following morning, her husband came to me before daylight, and told me he feared his wife was dead, and he wished me to go with him immediately. On the way, he expressed the hope that she might not be dead. It might be some sort of fit, he said. But when I reached the chamber I found the woman dead. There was no sign of any struggle—no sign of suffering of any kind—no mark visible anywhere to indicate that there had been any pain.”

“And was there no autopsy?” I asked.

“No,” replied the physician. “The family were opposed to it unless it was deemed necessary in the eyes of the law. I had been thoughtful enough to take a stomach-pump with me, and one of the first things I did, after finding that life was extinct, was to use the pump. It is one of the best in use, and with it I know that I raised the entire contents of the stomach. Thus I was able to declare upon my oath that there had been nothing taken into the stomach that had produced death. The coroner came in, and both the other physicians residing in the village were summoned. We explained to the officer that there could not possibly have been any poison in the case; and also that there had been no external violence. Of course we could only decide that death had resulted from a disease of the heart, though I had never discovered signs of any such complaint. But her husband informed us that she had been subject to spells of suffocation at night, as though her breath had stopped, and so forth. Mrs. Parkhurst had told me something of this; but I had attributed the difficulty to indigestion. However, it is very evident that there was disease of the heart; and as we gave the coroner assurance to that effect, he deemed no further examination necessary.”

“Did Mr. Parkhurst object to an examination?” I asked.

“Not at all,” said the doctor. “He only expressed a strong dislike of having the body of his wife mutilated. He told me, if I was very anxious, and would allow one or two of the female friends to be present, I might do it; but I did not insist, as I saw that he really disliked the idea.”

This was the story of Worthy Parkhurst's death.

And now, why should her daughter be seeking a home?—She was the only child, as her mother had no children by her second husband. The woman had been worth money when she became the wife of Herman Parkhurst. I had supposed that she owned at least twenty thousand dollars. It was a mystery to me. I told my wife that I could not understand it. But we might learn something from Harriet herself, when she came. So, as the account of Mott's surgical operation was very interesting, I left the matter at that point,—and having cut the leaves, went on with my reading.

I had just finished the article, and was running over another on the subject of a newly discovered anesthetic, when a ring at the door-bell broke in upon my vision of comfort. The servant came into the sitting-room and announced that two gentlemen wished to see me. I went out into the hall, and found there Fred Mallory and Albert Carr, two medical students, who were spending the winter with a relative in the village, and pursuing their studies after their own fashion. They were bright, intelligent young men, possessing a strong love of the science, and I had taken much pleasure in helping them.

“Doctor,” said Fred, looking carefully around to assure himself that no other ears were near, “we've got a splendid *cadaver*, and we want you to come over and help us. Come—you must be our demonstrator.”

I asked them what they had got.

“It's a whole body,” said Fred, “and a fresh one at that. We bought it of a man tonight. He's been engaged this long while to get us one, and this is the first chance he's had. It's a female, and perfect. Come,—don't say no.”

To the outside world I may find it difficult to present this matter as it appears to us professionals. But this I will say, in all truth and honesty: No pious clergyman ever opened his Bible with more profound reverence for the need of his calling, and sincere desire to arrive at the truth, than does the true physician and surgeon apply his knife to the lifeless tabernacle of humanity that has come under his hands. I have helped cut many a human body to shreds, but I never yet approached the work but with a renewed reverence for the wondrous handiwork of God, and a thankfulness that I was permitted to unlock the storehouse of a knowledge that was to result to the good of my fellow men. I have saved many precious lives by my skill; but I never could have guided the life-saving knife if this critical and practical study of the human frame had not enabled me to know just *where* and *when* and *how* to cut.

And even then, with the frost of age upon my bow, I embraced the opportunity this offered almost as eagerly as in earlier years, and I was not long in getting my dissecting case, and rigging myself for the walk through the wintry air.

The young men had a very comfortable and convenient dissecting-room arranged in a corner of a barn belonging to Fred's aunt—a room which had been originally set apart for the storing of tools; and here, upon a table, lay the *cadaver*. As soon as the door had been locked, the cloth was removed, and the reader can perhaps judge of my emotions when I beheld the marble face of Worthy Parkhurst! The resurrectionist had robbed her grave. At first I shrank back, feeling that

nothing could induce me to proceed with the work which I had come to do. The students had known nothing of Worthy Parkhurst, so they did not share my feelings.

By and by other feelings came to influence me. Since the body had thus been brought to my hand, I thought I would really like to know what caused her death. This desire soften the first repulsion, and after a time I consented to demonstrate upon one condition; and that was, that every part of the body should be carefully and even religiously kept, and in the end restored to the coffin whence it had been taken. I stated that I myself would pay the resurrectionist for doing that part of the work. Both young men gave me their word that it should be done as I had said, and we went to work.

We did not delay long over the integuments and muscles of the breast; but as soon as possible I laid bare the sternum and separated it from the ribs, and when I had lifted it from its place the heart and lungs were exposed. I found no trouble there. A healthier heart, in every respect, never rested in a human bosom. Nor was there any congestion in that region. The aorta was full, as were all the other arteries and veins thus exposed.

Both the students asked me, What had been the matter with the woman? I could not tell them. It was as though she had been stricken down in an instant. I have examined the bodies of those who have been instantly killed by lightning, and the appearance was the same as this. Of one thing I was sure: There had been no disease of any kind; but life had been suspended in the twinkling of an eye, without any apparent internal cause. That there could have been no cause in the stomach I was satisfied from the testimony of the attending physician.

I went home that night with only one thought in my mind; and that thought kept me awake long after I had pressed my pillow: What had cause Worthy Parkhurst's death?

On the following afternoon I was at the dissecting table again. I did not use the knife; but directed the students, and gave them information as they progressed. It would be of no interest to the general reader to be told of the ten thousand things that arrest the attention and careful consideration of the medical student while engaged in opening the vast stores of interesting and important facts that are contained within that wonderful house we inhabit.

It will be borne in mind that it was in the winter time, and as the subject was a healthy one, the tissues could be kept a long time free from taint. On the seventh day we reached the cervical vertebrae, and I was upon the point of showing the action of those muscles which assist in rotating the head. Fred asked me how much of a puncture would be required in that region to produce death. I informed him that the point of the merest bodkin, inserted in the joint between the atlas and the occipital bone, so that it punctured the medulla, would produce death on the instant. "Like that!" said I, snapping my thumb and finger.

And then we turned the subject over upon its breast that I might demonstrate more clearly.

"There," said I, resting the point of my dissecting knife upon the joint, "is the spot. A common darning needle forced in there, between the atlas and occipital bone, turned slightly upwards towards the occipital foramen, will pierce the medulla oblongata; and that is simply instant death.

The medulla oblongata is really the center of the nervous forces—the connecting link between the body and the brain; or, in the words of an eminent man, it is ‘the link which binds us to life;’ and as a very slight shock is death to a single nerve, so a very slight shock to this great nervous center is death to the whole body. Some metaphysicians have located the *soul* at this point; but as that is beyond the province of demonstration the anatomist has nothing to do with it. Just think of it,” I went on, as I noticed that the students were interested with the subject: “If people who have murder on their hands only possessed this knowledge of anatomy, they might be spared the use of poisons, and the result of most certain detection; for an instrument so slight that not a drop of blood can ooze from its wound, and which would hardly leave the trace of a pin’s prick behind it, would do the work; and that, too, without the remotest—”

At this juncture I came to a sudden stop in my speech. While speaking I had been pressing upon the designated spot with my knife, and the sharp point had pierced the integument, and I felt it come in contact with some hard substance which I knew could not be bone.

The young men asked me what I had found; and I told them to wait until I had made an examination. Taking a pair of fine forceps in my left hand I seized the cuticle, and carefully cur down the vertebra, and as I cut, my knife grated upon something of a metallic kind. I laid bare the point of articulation between the atlas and the occipital bone, and when I had cleared away the integument I found a piece of steel projecting from the joint. My hands trembled, but I kept on with my work. With the utmost care I separated the joint, and there I found embedded in the substance of the medulla, a small pen-knife blade! It had been driven into the joint, and it might have been broken off by accident, or by design.

I asked the students if they had done that. Of course they had not. And I might have known without asking them, for they were as much surprised as was I. In fact, it was a startling discovery to the three of us, and it was some moments before we could calmly discourse upon the subject. At length I made answer to their numerous questions after this fashion:

“My boys,” said I, after I had wiped the tiny bit of steel, and carefully folded it in a piece of paper, “if there is any such thing on earth as direct imposition of Divine Providence, then I think I can see one in this. The body of this woman must have been given into our hands for an especial purpose. A most foul and wicked murder has been done, and —“

“Hold on, doctor!” cried Fred Mallory, with a show of deep concern. “It will not answer to make this thing public. What sort of a scrape should we be in! We should have the whole town down upon us like a pack of mad and hungry wolves, let alone what the law might do.”

I told my young friends to be under no apprehension.

“Of course,” said I, “the very nature of the method of discovery precludes the possibility of bringing the villain to public justice; but still I think I can make use of it to serve the end of justice in another way. I know something, and I suspect much more. Leave the matter in my hands for the present, and I will let you know the result at which I may arrive.”

On the very next day after making this startling discovery, Harriet Roberts called upon my wife, and I had the opportunity to converse with her. I said to her that she must excuse me if I asked her some plain questions, and I hoped she would give me direct and truthful answers, as it might be in my power to materially assist her. And then, when she had expressed a willingness to answer, I commenced the examination:

“Have you any idea how much property your mother held when she married with Herman Parkhurst?”

“Yes, sir,” she replied; “I know all about it. She owned the house and the land, and the brick store; and then there were thirty-five thousand dollars in the bank belonging to my mother and to me.”

“Do you know where that money is now?”

“My step-father has used it all, sir.”

The girl reflected a moment, with much apparent trouble of mind, and then resumed:

“It was hard for my mother to do it, but Parkhurst pressed her so persistently that she was forced to yield. He professed to have a grand scheme for money-making in some western lands, and he wanted forty thousand dollars for the enterprise, declaring that he could double it in two years. Having gained my mother’s consent, he worked some plan with the other parties who had charge of my share of the property, and at length contrived to get the whole of the money from the bank. The real estate had all been left to my mother, and he raised five thousand dollars upon that, making forty thousand dollars in all.”

“And do you know what he did with this money?”

“He said he had sent it to his agent out West to pay for a township of land.”

“My dear girl,” said I, as she showed signs of timidity, “I wish you would tell me the whole story as you understand it; for, if Herman Parkhurst has done you wrong, I think I can do something towards inducing him to do you justice—that is, if he has the power to do so. Now, what do you think he did with that money?”

“I will tell you the truth, sir; but you must not let Mr. Parkhurst know what I have told you, for I am afraid of him. He is not a kind man. He did not make my mother happy. After he got the money into his hands, he was different from what he was before. My mother, sir, did not believe that he had ever bought any land. She believed that he had taken the money away to New York, or to some other city, and deposited it in his own name. Last summer—I think it was during the last week in August—he told us that the land speculation was a failure, and that every dollar of our money was lost. My mother felt very badly—she cried a great deal—but she was forced to appear calm out of doors, because he threatened her with personal violence if she did not.”

“And you dared not call upon any of your father’s old friends for counsel and aid?” said I.

“My mother would not let me, sir. She could see no use in it. If the money was gone, there was an end of it; and as for seeking any revenge, she had no heart to do it.”

“Did your mother then think that her husband was lying to her about the money?”

“No, sir. She had no such suspicions until about a month ago. About the first of December, she saw a letter which Parkhurst had written to some one in New York, in which he spoke of taking ten or fifteen thousand dollars’ worth of stock in some company, if he could be assured that it was good. He had left the letter open upon his desk, and he came in while my mother was looking at it. He made some explanation at the time, but my mother was not satisfied.”

“And now,” said I, “that your mother is dead, you are left in want?”

“I am left to look out for myself,” replied Harriet. “Mr. Parkhurst has informed me that he shall be obliged to hunt up business, and that he cannot support me. Our real estate is so encumbered by mortgages that it can yield me little or nothing. I have consulted our lawyer, and he does not see how he can help me. Those who had charge of the property allowed it to slip through their fingers, and as it was done with consent of the real owners, no action can be brought with any prospect of success.”

I thought I understood the matter pretty thoroughly now, and it was plain to me what I ought to do. But where was Herman Parkhurst? And what did he propose to do?

Harriet informed me that he was at that present time at home, but he evidently intended to leave before many days.

I told the girl to make herself at home beneath my roof for the present, and I would see what could be done for her.

That evening I took Fred Mallory and Albert Carr into my wagon, and drove over to the neighboring town, where we found Mr. Herman Parkhurst at home, and alone. He appeared to be ill at ease when he saw me upon his door-step, and sought to put me off with the plea that he was very busy and could not wait upon me; but I was not to be thus disposed of. I told him that my business was of the utmost importance, and that I and my friends would see him privately. We would not detain him long. He trembled even then, and looked like a man who would have given much could he have had the power of rendering himself invisible. He led us into his private room, and when we had taken seats he waited for me to speak. I was determined that I would not beat about the bush, but come directly and squarely to the matter in hand. I had told everything to my companions, and we were as sure of the deed which Herman Parkhurst had done as though we had seen him make the fatal puncture.

“Mr. Parkhurst,” said I, speaking calmly and deliberately, but with a dept of feeling that sat him quivering at the start, “I had the honor of being one of Selden Roberts’s warm personal friends, and I feel a deep and abiding interest in the welfare of his daughter, Miss Roberts is now at my house, and I have come to see if I cannot prevail upon you to assist her.”

The man's countenance brightened as I spoke the last words, and his relief was manifested in a look of impudence.

"Upon my word, Dr. Lord, you are a valuable friend," he said, with a smile; "and if I had it in my power to render the girl any assistance, your touching eloquence might move me to do so."

His tone did not worry me, for I knew that he was a coward as well as a villain.

"Mr. Parkhurst, when Selden Roberts died he left property to the amount of over forty thousand dollars; and as Harriet Roberts was his only child, and as his wife died without further issue, that property belongs to the child."

Parkhurst snapped his fingers and smiled.

"Upon my soul, my dear Doctor," he cried, "I wish I had it to give to the poor girl; but since I have it not I don't see how I can give it. Perhaps you can suggest some way in which I can raise the small amount of forty thousand dollars."

"I think I can," I replied, coolly.

The man seemed startled, and for a moment the old perturbation returned.

"Indeed, sir, I wish you would tell me where I can find it."

"I will tell you the next thing to it," I said, "I will tell you that YOU MUST FIND IT."

"Eh!"

"YOU MUST FIND IT!"

The man did not know how to take this.

"*Must find it?*" he repeated. "Indeed, Doctor Lord, you are inclined to be facetious."

"Not at all," said I. "I was never more soberly in earnest in my life."

"Well—upon my word!" he uttered, after regarding me a while with a look of blank astonishment. "I don't know whether you are demented, or whether you have come here to insult me. By —, sir!" he added, with an oath, as his anger seemed to gain ascendancy, "your course is a curious one. Why do you come here upon such an errand, and bring these witnesses with you? I wish you would explain yourself. These gentlemen are both strangers to me."

"Excuse me, Mr. Parkhurst. I forgot to introduce them. This is Mr. Fred Mallory; and this is Mr. Albert Carr. They are students of mine just at this present time, and you will find their friendship



worth the gaining.—Gentlemen, this is Mr. Herbert Parkhurst.—Now, my dear sir, you know them.”

“And now,” added Parkhurst, with suppressed anger, “Will you explain yourself.”

“Mr. business, sir,” I replied, “is to induce you to restore to Harriet Roberts the sum of forty thousand dollars.”

“Bah! Don’t be a fool!” he exclaimed.

“I think I have done nothing foolish yet,” I said. “And to convince you that I had my wits about me before I started to come upon this errand, I will inform you that I come prepared with a good and sufficient draft upon you for the amount.”

“A draft upon me, sir?”

“Yes.”

A smile—an impudent, forced smile—broke over his features as he said:

“A draft from Miss Harriet, I suppose.”

“No,” I returned. “It is from your dead wife!”

He trembled again, and looked fearfully into my face.

“I will show it to you,” I said. And I took a paper from my pocket and unrolled it, and took out the thing which that paper had contained; and then I added:

“Here it is, sir—A PEN-KNIFE BLADE. It is a very small affair; but I think you will recognize it.” And I held it between my thumb and finger so that the light fell upon its dark brown surface.

The wretch as seized with a frightful tremor; his hands dropped upon his knees; his lower jaw fell; his eyes seemed ready to start from their orbs; and for a few mementos his heart stood as still as though he had been dead.

“Herman Parkhurst,” I continued, when I saw that his breath was coming back with a gasp, “you and I and these two young gentlemen are at present the only ones beside God that know of this matter. If you will pay over to Harriet Roberts forty thousand dollars, and then leave this State never to return, you may go to your grave without further harm from me. But if you refuse me—if you hesitate, even—you shall answer the call of this draft upon the gallows! And you must not think of escape. From this time until Harriet has the money one of us three shall keep an eye upon your every movement; and if you attempt to elude us, we shall call in assistance.”

The man's hands were now folded, and great drops of sweat stood upon his dark brow; and I could hear his heart beat as plainly as though the sound had come to me through the auscultation of a stethoscope.

"In God's name!" he at length gasped, struggling and choking, "what do you mean?"

"I mean, Herman Parkhurst," I replied, as solemnly as I could speak, "that your own hand did a deed so black that I shudder to think of it. Oh, my God! how could you have been so cool and steady in the work? How could your eye select, and your hand strike, that one fatal spot! In Heaven's name, what possessed you to do that dreadful deed? What had your poor wife done that you should cut the thread of her life while yet the world held hope in store for her? Did you think of that All-seeing Eye that never closes in sleep? Did you think that angels sometimes hover about the couch of the sleeper? O, Herman Parkhurst, was there not in your heart, at that awful moment, some—"

At this point the wretch put forth his hands, and, with a wailing cry, begged me to stop. He did not deny his crime; he did not offer to do so. When I ceased speaking, at his entreaty, he bowed his head upon his hands, and remained so for some moments. Finally he looked up, and said, in a hoarse, unearthly whisper, shuddering from head to foot:

"You have seen her body?"

"I have had it under my hand, Herman Parkhurst, and I know just how you did the work. I could not with my own hand have hit the mark more surely."

"And only you three know of it?"

"Only us three."

A moment more, and then the wretch started to his feet; and while I was making ready to be prepared for any act of violence he might be incited to by his frenzy, he sank upon his knees, and raised his clasped hands towards me. And then, in language which I cannot transcribe, so wild and incoherent was it, he begged me to spare him. If I would give him my word that he should not be apprehended—that we who held the secret would keep it sacred and inviolate, he would give to Harriet Roberts the sum I had named.

When would he do it?

He would do it within two days. He would have to go to New York to get it.

Upon the condition that he would allow us three to go with him, and that he would not attempt to elude us until the money was paid over, I gave him the promise.

That night Fred and Albert remained in his house, and on the next day we went to New York together. He drew the money from a bank, and placed it in my hands, and I then learned that if I had been sour-and-twenty hours later in my visit I should have found him gone, for all his

moveable goods had been sent to the city, and he was ready for his start. He did not intend to return with us, and before I left him, he acknowledged to me that he was almost glad I had discovered the fearful secret. Somehow, he felt as though he had made some reparation for the crime he had committed, and if his life was spared, the thing would not weigh so heavily upon his soul, since others knew it, and since the blood-money was not upon his hands.

I asked him if he would tell me how he judged so accurately where to put his pen-knife for the fatal stroke.

Hen answered frankly. It was the reading in a paper an account of how quickly and surely life could be destroyed in that manner, that had led his thoughts in that direction; and after the plan had been matured in his mind, and he had fixed the property so that not a dollar of it was visible, he had made that point his study. When he had first spirited his wife's property away, he had not thought of killing her; he had then only a vague idea that he might outlive her. The murder was an after-thought, born of reading the article to which he had referred. He had visited the Anatomical Museum on Broadway, and there studied the various preparations of skeletons and casts, until the knowledge had been gained.

And that was the last I saw of Herman Parkhurst. He went to the western country, and a few years afterwards he died at St. Louis of fever and ague.

The forty thousand dollars I gave to Harriet; and as her suspicions were already aroused to an uncomfortable degree, I had to tell her the truth; and she bore it with fortitude and resignation. Her mother, she had faith to believe, was happier in the spirit world, than she could have been to have lived longer with her hard-hearted husband.

And Harriet is now Mrs. Fred Mallory—an excellent wife and mother, with a pleasant home, and a proud and happy husband. God bless and keep her!

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