

Marked for the Knife

About two years before the startling revelations respecting the dissecting trade in Edinburg had placed the legal supply of “subjects” upon its present satisfactory footing, there occurred to my elder brother, at that time a delicate boy of about 14, a singular adventure, involving such a shock to his nerves as, the doctors believed, very much hastened his death, which occurred in less than a year after it.

We then resided in a large white house, with a row of poplars in front, close to one of our canals. Within a stone’s-throw of our hall-door was a lock and a lock-house, and then followed, in the London direction, one of the longest and most solitary levels to be met with in the United Kingdom.

The canal, at a point about 70 yards from the lock, makes a slight deflection. The consequence is that neither the lock nor our house is visible from the long, straight level that follows, and which is closely fenced between tall hedges and old trees.

My brother had been ordered walking exercise, and my father generally appointed the path beside the level I have described for his walk. The traffic, never very active, was, at that time, in a state little better than extinct. Not more than three or four boats passed in a day, and chiefly, owing to its perfect quietude, it had been chosen for the walk of our solitary invalid.

It was now summer, and the hour of his daily walk was from five to seven; the earlier hours of the afternoon being pronounced too hot for exercise.

On the evening in question he set out alone. His usual walk was to a point two miles up the level, where there was a stone block, on which he used to sit and rest a little before setting out for home.

While he was taking his ease on this stone bench, and listlessly looking up and down the long and deserted reach of water, there emerged, a few hundred yards to his left, from a sequestered path, a singular figure, which approached slowly, and passed him by, with only the narrow tow-path between them. It was moving in the direction of our home, and was that of an emaciated man, with a complexion dark as very old box-wood, limping, as it seemed, painfully, very much stooped, and with a big angular hump upon his back. His hair was long and sooty black; he had prominent dark eyes, under thick black brows, and his face and chin were stubbled with a week’s growth of beard. He was leaning heavily on a long stick, and walked with a kind of hitch, which resembled a spasm, and gave one the idea that each step was accompanied by a separate sting of pain.

The face of this man expressed extreme weakness and suffering, and might almost be that of a man dragging himself away, with a mortal wound, to some spot where he might lie down and die in quiet.

He had a long and heavy bottle-green coat, which had grown to be, indeed, a coat of many colors: for over the threadbare and greasy ground it was overlaid, with fantastic and extraordinary industry, with a [tessellation] of patches, of every imaginable color, in which yellow, red, and blue, and black were discernable, under a varnish of grease, and toned with a variety of dirt; and even these patches were patched again, and had broken here and there into rents and fissures, and bunches of shreds and tatters. Around his body was buckled a broad discolored leathern strap, and he wore a wide-leafed felt hat, with a rather conical crown, brown and grimed by time and ill treatment.

This figure, with long gaiters of rabbit skin, and shapeless “brogues,” limped past my brother without taking the slightest notice of him; and uttering now and then a short groan, as if of suppressed pain, he excited the wonder, and, in some degree, the compassion of the boy.

He watched the progress of this man, who was moving with great difficulty, and with many halts, in the direction of our home. It was not until he had gotten nearly a quarter of a mile that my brother got up, now quite rested, to follow in the same direction.

As this strange, crooked man with the stick got on, he appeared to grow more and more exhausted, and at length he tottered into a little recess at the edge of the path, and fell helplessly on his side among the bushes.

The boy quickened his pace, and as he approached the spot he passed the head of a narrow lane, in which he saw a donkey and a cart standing. The cart had in it, upon some straw, a piece of old carpet, from under which emerged some folds of coarse canvas, like a part of an old sack; but he could not see any one in charge of this conveyance, though being anxious to obtain help, he called repeatedly.

Despairing of succor, he went on, and reached the point where he had seen the man fall. Here he found him. He had crept a little further in among the bushes. He was supporting himself feebly on the ground upon his elbow, his eyes turned up as if he were on the point of swooning, and he moaned faintly.

The boy’s courage almost failed him; but the sick man seemed to perceive him, turned his eyes upon him imploringly, and extending his hand toward him, so evidently signaled for aid that my brother could not help drawing near.

The fainting man then told him, in a whisper, that if he would take his hand, and draw him gently toward him he would perhaps, be able to turn himself a little, to his great relief.

My brother did give him his hand, accordingly, and the fainting man, instead of taking it, seized his arm above the elbow, with a gigantic hand, in a grip like a vice, and jerking him under, sprang over him, so as to pinion him fast. He had carried in his hand the end of a belt which he

had removed from around his own body while waiting for his prey, and with a dexterity acquired, no doubt, by long practice, in a moment, with the now disengaged hand, he drew it around the boy's arms and body at a single jerk, with a pressure so powerful that he could scarcely breathe, much less disengage his arms.

In another moment, with his knee on the boy's chest, and one broad hand placed right across his mouth so as to stifle his screams effectually, he hitched round what seemed to be his hump, but what proved to be, in fact, a bundle from which, with the other hand, he took out, with the quickness and neatness of a skilled manipulator, two things: one a sort of cushion about eight inches square, covered with chamois-leather—I have that horrible relic, no doubt intended to aid in the process of suffocation, still in my possession; the other was the renowned pitch-plaster.

My brother had no idea what he intended, for the disclosure in Edinburg had not yet enlightened and terrified people of all ages throughout England.

The miscreant kept his face close to his victim's, with his powerful eyes fixed on his. His dark, lean features and long beak, and the thick hair that hung forward like a sooty plumage round them, and the long sinewy neck that arched over my poor brother as he lay at his assailant's mercy, gave him, in the fascinated gaze of the boy, the appearance of a monstrous bird of prey.

I dare say this ghoul had an actual power, such as many men are said to possess, of controlling the springs of action, mental and bodily, by some occult power of the eye. To my brother it seemed that it needed a perpetual and desperate struggle of will to prevent a frightful trance from stealing over him.

For a moment the wretch's hand was slightly raised from the boy's mouth. He intended, no doubt, at this instant to introduce the pitch plaster, which was to stop both mouth and nostrils. But my brother now struggling frantically, uttered two piercing yells, which compelled the murderer to replace his hand before he had accomplished the purpose. He was evidently now transported with fury. Up to this he had been operating as methodically as a spider. He looked so fiendish that my brother fancied he would cut his throat, or otherwise dispatch him at the moment.

His plans, however, were different. He had no idea of losing sight of his interests, much less of his safety. No principle of his nefarious trade was better established than the absolute necessity of leaving no trace of actual violence upon the persons of his victims. Even the knee with which he held his prey was padded so carefully that this young boy's breast did not exhibit the slightest contusion, although so long under a pressure which held him at the verge of suffocation.

Rapidly, and with more success, the villain again essayed his final slight. One dreadful yell escaped, and the deadly pitch-plaster was fixed on mouth and nose, and another sound or respiration became impossible.

The leafy bushes above and about him, the figure, the face of the spectre, began to swim before his eyes. He saw the man, still on his knees, rise with a start and pause, with eyes askant, and his dark hand to his ear. In the next instant he had disappeared.

In his struggle the boy now rolled from the lair in which he had been attacked into the clear light upon the open path, where he lay perfectly insensible.

When consciousness returned, which was not for some minutes, three men were about him, drenching his head with water, and all endeavoring to extract a word of explanation; but for long after he could not speak a syllable, nor, for some time, even hear distinctly what they said.

Not a moment was lost, so soon as he was able to describe what had happened, in directing pursuit, wherever any results were the least likely. All my brother could say as to the point toward which the assassin had directed his flight was that, as his sight failed, he thought, though very distinctly, he saw him pass away obliquely in the direction of the lane in which he had observed the donkey-cart.

It must have belonged to an accomplice, who was there by arrangement. Everything had been prepared to carry away the body of the poor fellow, which would have been secured in the sack, enveloped in the carpet and covered with straw, and thus secreted in some lonely lock-up yard, until at dead of night, it would have been conveyed to the dissecting-room. The boy's hat thrown upon the water would have turned inquiry off the scent, and induced delay.

The strap, still buckled with cruel force about the poor fellow's arms and ribs, the chamois cushion I have mentioned, and the pitch-plaster fixed over the lower part of his face, were the only "properties" of the villain left to indicate his visit.

The cool old assassin had carried off every other trace of his presence, and he and his comrade, taking the donkey-cart with them, had decamped with a celerity, and managed their disguise with an art which, as matters then were and with a full hour's start, had baffled pursuit.

No doubt, with the police force now at our command, the result might have been different. As it was, no clue whatever was discovered; and this was positively marvellous, considering the marked peculiarities of dress and of person that belonged to the culprit. The persons best acquainted with the ways of our criminals at that period were of opinion that the strange details of the dress, the gait, the hair, the complexion, and the distortion of the figure, were parts of an elaborate piece of masquerading.

There was some controversy as to the object of the projected crime. It was not until the terrific exposure at Edinburg had made all the world horribly familiar with the machinery of that peculiar species of murder that all debate upon the matter ceased, and the pitch-plaster was accepted as conclusive evidence that the body was intended for sale to the surgeons.

No doubt these poachers on a great scale were thoroughly skilled in all the finesse and strategy of their contraband art. The regularity of my poor brother's solitary walk, its favorable hour, and the suggestion of drowning as the cause of his disappearance, had all been noted.

My brother was ailing at the time this dreadful attempt was made upon his life. He survived it little more than ten months, and the able physician who attended him referred his death [as] the awful shock which his system had received.

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