

(editor's note: This paper was transcribed from a handwritten cursive copy with various difficulties. For a perfect rendition, the reader might wish to consult the original, itself a copy, in the volume entitled *Literary Club Papers*, May 30, 1891 to February 6, 1892)

## The Doctor and the Stranger

The young doctor had a busy day. One most trying to his nervous system. What pain and suffering he had witnessed. He sat himself down, and it all came back to him. He saw it again in his mind's eye that pale faced boy all drawn together by inward convulsions, whose indomitable will have yielded at last to those two ruthless conquerors of all boys, green apples and buttermilk. And while at the time he had not promised that boy an early grave, still he did not witness his sufferings unmoved. And resolved then and there, by closer application to scientific study to find another lymph cure for green apple consumption.

And so all day from the first visit to the last, when he set a man's jaw, dislocated in swearing at his wife -- there had been nothing but trial and tribulation. And here was rest at last. He settled himself more comfortably in his chair and closed his eyes. It was true this was his office hour, but it was equally true that he had never as yet seen an office patient. So he dozed away. No doubt feeling himself is safe against intrusion as the public did in not visiting him. He awakened with a start, the night had come on, and his lamp was lit, but he was not alone. There at his table sat a stranger with a head like a living skeleton, his features wan and emaciated, his countenance expressive of the deepest grief and sorrow. He was writing diligently on the doctor's new letterheads (just-ordered and not yet paid for). The tears were streaming down his cheeks, his frame shook with suppressed sobs; the intervals he would wipe his eyes with a handkerchief already saturated with emotion and now and then would stop to wring it out. The key must have been indulging in this sweet sorrow for some time, for on the back of another chair a second handkerchief was drying.

The doctor finally recovered himself, arose from his chair and advanced towards the stranger, who was still writing and weeping, the stranger arose also, disclosing as he did so, not the frame of a living skeleton, which one might reasonably have expected from the view of his head but in an enormously fat and chubby body like a many times enlarged Santa Claus. The doctor spoke, Anger lent dignity to his words. "What is the meaning of this visit? What right have you to enter my office without ringing, to use my stationary without permission? Who are you? What do you want?" The stranger replied, his voice was irresistibly comic and droll, and his fat body seemed to shake with suppressed laughter, but his eyes still streamed tears, his face still spoke [*awe*]. "Dr. I rang before I came in and wrung afterward," pointing to his driving handkerchief. "Strange as it may seem to you, I come as a patient, so be patient yourself.

I found you were composing yourself. So I was composing myself, when you awoke; in other words I was writing a funeral dirge, to which were to be sung, verses giving a history of my peculiar case. Sir, I am an inveterate punster. First pity, then cure me, if

you can. If you will do for me what may be done, you may then dun me for what may be due; you see how the fatal habit has grown upon me. I cannot speak without offending, but I have been punished as mortal man never was before. Witness my sorrow, then hear my voice. Look at my head then view my body. I am a living paradox while I weep outwardly, I am laughing inwardly, moved and controlled by the most diabolical spirit of humor. Listen to my history.

As a youth I was in many respects like hundreds of other boys, but for the fact that I was unusually depressed and sad in spirit, but notwithstanding this my appearance was in no way singular or peculiar, and I had some pretensions to good looks. At the age of 19, writing an excellent hand, I hired myself as a copying clerk to one H-- an old bachelor with whom I lived. H-- had permanent employment from the world renowned organization, known as the L-----y Cl--b of Ci-----ti, to copy all the essays and papers read there, transcribing the same in large strictly bound volumes which he kept in an iron safe in the house.

As he advanced in years, I relieved him of his duty and on his death succeeded to his post. At first I copied mechanically, without just or due appreciation of the true literary character of my work, stumbling or groping in the dark, sometimes mistaking the most comic productions for the truest pathos, and at others weeping long just when I should have laughed loudest, and finally a great light flashed upon me, I could determine which was which, by lot. From that time my whole nature was changed, instead of being as formerly, unusually depressed, I became unduly elated. My spirits rose I laughed aloud. I read only the witty and humorous contributions but read them again and again. I took to eating "roasted chestnuts", and then to punning. Night and day I revel like a fiend in my love for the humorous, so much so that when one day I was summoned to attend a relative's funeral, I could hardly compose my features or treat it as a solemn occasion. I went from bad to worse. The power of mind so worked over matter that my figure changed, becoming irresistibly comic, almost as you see it now. I took to reading the Club's statistical papers, those turned my brain, and I became delirious; was thrown upon a bed of sickness where I remained many months.

When I recovered I found that while my body was inactive it became grosser and grosser. Yet my face had become thinner and thinner, taking on the semblance of a death head, as you see it now, and all the while I was continually weeping, for I had lost control of my lachrymal glands. Oh! Doctor, can you not save me and restore me to my former sober self. This is surely in your line. You have taken so many to the grave. At this last wretched pun, the unhappy man seemed to lose all self-control, and to the air of the Death March in Saul, shouted at the top of his voice the following doggerel:

Young man, young man, don't be melancholy  
See if like me you can be jolly.  
I never worry fret or cry, nor never even pout,  
In fact I am, and always was, the merriest man that's out.

The unusual noise in so quiet a sanctum attracted attention outside, and a crowd soon gathered, and then the police were summoned. The stranger still continued to sing; the appearance of the blue coats in the room, and his sudden seizure by two of them, did not in the least affect him, silence was only secured by gagging him, then "one of the finest" spoke, "Doctor, this is a harmless lunatic from the next block, who slipped away from his keeper this morning, we will carry him home in the patrol," and so they did, leaving the young doctor once more alone to resume his meditations.

Simeon M. Johnson

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