

THE HISTORY  
OF  
BURKE AND HARE.

---

INTRODUCTION.

*The Resurrectionist Movement—Its Contributing Causes and Results.*

THERE is perhaps no portion of the social history of Scotland which possesses greater interest of a variety of kinds than that which relates to the rise, development, and ultimate downfall of the resurrectionist movement. To many persons now living, but who are nearing the verge of the unseen world, the interest is in a sense contemporary, for their younger days were spent under the shadow which so long overspread our country; to those of a later generation the traditions—perhaps the events are scarcely of sufficiently remote occurrence to call the stories of them traditions—of that dreadful time served to make their young imaginations vivid, and render them more obedient to behests of their parents or nurses. How many can remember the time when they were frightened into good behaviour by the threat that, if they did not do what they were told, “Burke and Hare” would take them away; or who, passing by a churchyard on a dark night, with the light of the moon casting a gruesome glamour over the tombstones, recalled to mind the tales of the doings of the terrible resurrectionists. How many children—some of them old men and women now—in their play chanted the lines—

“ Burke an’ Hare  
Fell doun the stair,  
Wi’ a body in a box,  
Gaun to Doctor Knox ”;

who trembled, even during the day, when they passed the houses occupied by these two men in the West Port of Edinburgh, remembering the fearful deeds that were enacted there. But in addition to the extraordinary impression which the resurrectionist movement made on the minds of the people of Scotland, it must be admitted to have had one good result. In the face of restrictive laws it gave an impetus to anatomical study, which was in the first instance beneficial to humanity; and in the second to the medical schools of this country, notably to the Edinburgh medical school, which attained great reputation at the period when the majority of the subjects for dissection were obtained in a manner revolting to the best feelings of humanity.

This practice of violating sepulchres, which must ever be regarded as one of the foulest blots on Scottish civilization, may be said to have had several contributing causes. The principal of these is admitted on all hands to have been the discovery on the part of the medical faculty that the knowledge they possessed of the human frame was founded rather upon uncertain tradition than upon empirical science; that they were practically ignorant of anatomy; and that if they hoped to make any advance in the art of healing human diseases they must devote more attention to a minute study of the dead subject. Having arrived at this conclusion—and it is a wonder they did not do so earlier—they were met by a difficulty brought about by prejudice. The people of Scotland, even in the most lawless ages, had an almost superstitious reverence for the dead; a reverence, indeed, which they did not always pay to the living. In this they only showed their human nature, and exhibited those instincts which seem to characterise men of all countries and all times. The “something beyond” the mortal sphere caused a peculiar regard for the dead; their belief in a resurrection was rather material, and it was thought impossible by many that when the last trump should sound the dead could rise if the bodies were cut up in dissection. The bodies of the dead, therefore, were carefully entombed to await the last call. The almost insurmountable difficulty, then, that presented itself to the doctors when they awoke out of their dream of ignorance, was where to obtain those subjects

upon which they could experiment, and gain that knowledge of which they stood so much in need. The prejudice of the people, it has been stated, was against the subjection of the bodies of their deceased friends to such sacrilegious treatment, even though they were willing, for the most part, to admit that benefit was to be derived from it. As a consequence, science and prejudice came into violent conflict, and the war was carried on by the representatives of the former with a determined persistency that led more or less directly to shocking crime, but ultimately to a *modus vivendi* that was for the interests of all concerned. These were the two main causes of the traffic; but there were others which, while not bearing so directly upon it, greatly aided its development. It received considerable assistance from the remarkable superstitions long attached to graveyards, the stories of ghosts and of wandering spirits

“Doom’d for a certain time to walk the night”;

of spiteful goblins and playful “brownies,” or of the uncanny dabblers in the forbidden art, whose dominion over the world was only during the midnight hour. It was then that the witches met in solemn conclave with the “father of lies” to plot against the peace of humanity, and that the denizens of the nether hell breathed the free air of earth, away from the choking fumes of the infernal brimstone. Such were the beliefs, and it therefore behoved every well-conducted person to keep the house after night-fall; and when any ventured abroad during the magic hours the working of superstition on minds either naturally credulous, or muddled with deep potations at the village tavern, or both, was sure to produce all kinds of apparitions, more or less fearful. Through this means the men employed by the surgeons to obtain bodies for dissection,—men, generally, whose utter absence of moral principle gave them the power to discredit the fears of their more conscientious countrymen,—were enabled for a time to go about their dreadful work with great immunity. Gradually the people threw off their superstitious feelings about church-yards, and considering

themselves safe from unhallowed influences by the presence of numbers, they took guard in the protection of the bodies of their friends. Many skirmishes ensued between these watchers and the resurrectionists, and these have given to Scottish literature a large collection of anecdotes of rather a unique description. Then the large iron cages, or railings, placed over graves, give our churchyards an aspect peculiarly their own. All these matters have made an impression on the Scottish mind which it will yet take generations to efface.

There is, however, another aspect in which the resurrectionist movement can be regarded. It gave rise to a series of the most shocking crimes, committed in Edinburgh by Burke and Hare and their female confederates; and the discovery of these, again, brought about a trial occupying a most prominent and curious place in the annals of Scottish criminal law. In that trial legal points of the utmost importance were involved; and in connection with it the most eminent lawyers of the time were engaged. Were it only because of the great trial with which the movement may be said to have terminated it is deserving the attention of all interested in the history of Scotland. Further than that, it brought about the passing of a measure which relieved the medical faculty of the restrictions to inquiry and investigation under which they had so long laboured, and tended towards the development of a science in which humanity is too deeply interested to neglect.

---

## CHAPTER I.

*Early Prohibition of Dissection—Shakespeare's Tomb—The Progress of Anatomy—Curious Incident in Edinburgh—An Old Broadside Ballad on Body-Snatching—Tumults in Edinburgh and Glasgow—Female "Burkers."*

AT the first blush one is apt to think that the resurrectionist movement, culminating in Scotland by the apprehension of Burke and Hare, and the execution of the former, is of modern

growth. That this, however, is not the case, is shown by a little investigation into the records of the past. There are numerous instances, in all civilised countries, if not of active body-snatching, at least of prohibitions of it or anything akin. The early Christians put epitaphs on the tombs of deceased relatives calling the curses of heaven upon the sacrilegious hand that dared disturb the ashes of the dead; Pope Boniface VIII. issued a bull condemning even the profane perforation of a skeleton; and who knows but the well-known inscription on Shakespeare's tomb, written long before the great poet had become the object of a world's regard, may have been dictated by a similar feeling:—

“ Good friend, for Jesus' sake forbear  
To dig the dust inclosed here :  
Blest be the man that spares these stones,  
And curst be he that moves my bones.”

Then, again, the desire expressed by the dying Bruce that his heart should be cut from his body and taken to Jerusalem by the faithful Douglas, called forth the malediction of Pope Benedict XII. Mahomet, also, in the pages of the Koran, has forbidden dissection. All these instances show a most pronounced antipathy to the mutilation of the human body after death; and argue two things, first, that it was instinctive, and not a trait in the character of any particular nation or type of civilization; and, second, that unless a molesting cause existed, there would have been no need for the prohibitions. But the advancement of science was not to be bound down by this superstitious reverence for the dead; and, ultimately, in the sixteenth century, with the revival of learning, the bodies of criminals and unclaimed paupers were granted to surgeons for dissection, but then so sparingly that little progress in anatomy was made. The ignorance of the functions of the human body was so great, that the most haphazard methods of cure were adopted. If a sick person recovered it was more by chance than science, and if he died there is little doubt that death was hastened by the ignorance of his so called medical attendant,

who clung tenaciously to the traditions of his profession, be the result kill or cure.

The first indication of anything approaching body-snatching in Scotland is to be found in the Fountainhall MS., in the Library of the Faculty of Advocates in Edinburgh. As the entry is of more than ordinary interest it may be quoted *in extenso* :—

“6 Februarii 1678.—Four Ægyptians [Gypsies] of the name of Shaw were this day hanged, the father and three sones, for a slaughter committed by them upon one of the Faws (another tribe of these vagabonds, worse than the *mendicantes validi* mentioned in the code), in a drunken squabble, made by them in a randevouz they had at Romanno, with a designe to unite their forces against the clans of Browns and Bailzies, that were come over from Ireland to chasse them back again, that they might not share in their labors ; but in their ramble they discorded, and committed the fore-said murder, and sundry of them of both sydes ware apprehended. . . . Thir four being thrown all unto on hole digged for them in the Grayfriar Church Yeard, with their clothes on ; the nixt morning the youngest of the three sones (who was scarce sixteen) his body was missed, and found to be away. Some thought he being last thrown over the ladder, and first cut downe, and in full vigor, and no great heap of earth, and lying uppermost, and not so ready to smother, the fermentation of the blood, and heat of the bodies under him, might cause him rebound and throw off the earth, and recover ere the morning, and steall away ; which, if true, he deserves his life, tho’ the magistrats, or their bourreau, deserved a reprimande ; but others, more probably, thought his body was stolen away by some chirurgion, or his servant, to make ane anatomical dissection on ; which was criminal to take at their owne hand, since the magistrats would not have refused it ; and I hear the chirurgions affirme, the towne of Edinburgh is obliged to give them a malefactor’s body once a year for that effect, and its usual in Paris, Leyden, and other places to give them ; also some of them that dyes in hospitals.”

The obligation mentioned in this quotation as lying on the city of Edinburgh, was made under the charter granted by the Town Council to the Surgeons in 1505. This grant of one body in the year would, however, be of little value, and the inquiring spirit that was abroad gradually came to feel that the privilege was little better than none at all. In the last decade of the seventeenth century strenuous efforts were being made to establish a school of anatomy in the city. Alexander Monteith, one of the most eminent physicians of the time, made

the following proposal to the Town Council :—" We seek the liberty of opening the bodies of poor persons who die in Paul's Workhouse, and have none to bury them ; and also agree to wait on these poor for nothing, and bury them at our own charge, which now the town does. I do propose if this be granted to make better improvements in anatomy in a short time than have been made by Leyden in thirty years." Monteith had studied at Leyden. The Edinburgh Faculty were alarmed at the proposal, because they felt that, if it were approved, a privilege which they had hitherto enjoyed as a corporation would be given in a much more extended form to one of their number ; and they accordingly put forward an application in which they sought " the bodies of foundlings who dye betwixt the tyme that they are weaned and their being put to schools and trades ; also the dead bodies of such as are dead-born, which are exposed ; also, suicides, a violent death, and have none to own them ; likewise the bodies of such as are put to death by sentence of the magistrates." Both applications were granted, under condition, however, that the dissections were only to be made during the winter, and that the intestines were to be buried within forty-eight hours after the body was obtained, and the rest within ten days. Such restrictions were unworthy the enlightened policy the authorities were pursuing ; and through the very act by which they fed the spirit of inquiry they created an increased appetite for anatomical research, which quickly went beyond foolish conditions, and ultimately led many to adopt the practice of body-snatching. Even yet the supply of bodies was unequal to the demand, and the doctors' apprentices resorted to robbing Greyfriars Churchyard, then the chief place of burial in the city. Their work was done very stealthily, for no one except the most hardy would in that age venture near a churchyard after the " gloaming." The matter at last became known, and the College of Surgeons, on the 20th May, 1711, drew up a minute protesting against the practice, saying that " of late there has been a violation of sepulchres in the Greyfriars' Churchyard by some who most unchristianly has been stealing, or at least attempting to carry away, the bodies of the dead out of their graves." This

discovery caused a terrible sensation in the city, and it spread throughout Scotland. A broadside on the event was printed and hawked about the country. As it marks an important step in the progress of the movement, the quotation of such a lengthy document will be excused :—

*“ An Account of the most horrid and unchristian actions of the Gravemakers in Edinburgh, their raising and selling of the Dead, abhorred by Turks and Heathens, found out in this present year 1711, in the Month of May.*

Dear Friends and Christians, what shall I say,  
Behold, the dawning of the latter day  
Into this place most bright casts forth its rays—  
The like was never seen by mortal eyes.  
Methink I hear the latter trumpet sound,  
When emptie graves into this place is found,  
Of young and old, which is most strange to me,  
What kind of resurrection this may be.  
I thought God had reserved this power alone  
Unto himsell, till he erect'd his throne  
Into the clouds, with his attendance by,  
That he might judge the world in equity.  
But now I see the contrar in our land,  
Since men do raise the dead at their own hand ;  
And for to please their curiosities  
They them dissect and make anatomies.  
Such monsters of mankind was never known,  
As in this place is daily to be shown ;  
Who, for to gain some worldly vanities,  
Are guilty of such immoralities.  
The Turks and Pagans would amazed stand,  
To see such crimes committed in a land,  
As among Christians is to be found,  
Especially in Edinburgh doth abound.  
There is a rank of persons in this place  
That strive to run with speed a wicked race :  
They trample rudely on God's holy law,  
And of his judgment they stand not in aw ;  
For those that are laid in their graves at rest,  
This wicked crew they do their dust molest.  
Dead corps out of their graves they steal at night,  
Because such actions do abhorre the light.





**WILLIAM BURKE.**  
(From a Sketch taken in Court)

The heathen nations, for ought I read,  
Was never found for to molest the dead,  
That were their kindred, and among them born ;  
But we to nations all may be a scorn :  
In that such crimes is perpetrated here,  
As both the living and the dead do deer.  
These monsters of mankind, who made the graves,  
To the chirurgeons became hyred slaves ;  
They rais'd the dead again out of the dust,  
And sold to them, to satisfy their lust.  
As I'm inform'd, the chirurgions did give  
Fourty shillings for each one they receive :  
And they their flesh and bones assunder part,  
Which wounds their living friends unto the heart ;  
To think that any of their kindred born  
Unto the nations, should become a scorn ;  
For they their bones to other nations send—  
As I'm informed, this is their very end.  
How may now all the nations us deride,  
And call us poor, since that we sell our dead,  
Some coyn to get, the living to maintain ;  
The like in any nation ne're was seen.  
The godly sowe their dust on such cold ground  
As do our kirks and chappels compass round,  
That they may get their dust in such a field,  
So well refin'd, that it to them may yield  
A crop most plentiful at the last day,  
When they from dust must haste and come away.  
But now their dust they take out of the ground,  
So that nothing but empty graves is found.  
I'm very sorry that such things should be  
Practis'd by folk professing piety ;  
And the religion should be wounded so  
By any who under a name do go.  
But still I see profession is no grace,  
As does appear into the present case ;  
But more especially at the last day,  
When all the world shall be put in a fray,  
When stars shall fall out of the firmament,  
And sun and moon out of their orbs be rent,  
And all this earth into a flame shall burn,  
And eliments like liquid mettals run,  
And all mankind before God's throne shall come,  
That He may justice do unto each one—  
Then shall the separation be made  
Between them that are good and that are bad :

The good receiv'd to everlasting glore,  
 The bad cast down to hell for evermore.  
 All who to wrong the saints do still desire,  
 Dead or alive, shall have hell for their hyre,  
 Unless with speed they do repent of sin,  
 And do another course of life begin.  
 But I shall say no more upon this head,  
 Hoping henceforth they will not raise the dead,  
 But suffer them to rest into their beds,  
 And won their bread by following other trades."

Neither such a production as this, nor the mild protest from the College of Surgeons, was likely to put a stop to a practice which was being found useful on the one side and profitable on the other. Dr. Alexander Monro, "primus," the great anatomist, became Demonstrator of Anatomy in the University of Edinburgh, and his fame brought around him a large number of students. These seem to have been making depredations on the churchyards in the city and neighbourhood, and the College of Surgeons again took action, this time by ordering, on the 24th January, 1721, the insertion of a clause in the indenture of apprentices binding them not to engage in the violation of graves. Four years later, however—in April, 1725—the practice had grown to such an extent as to cause popular commotion. The people rose in angry protest against the violation of the sepulchres of their dead, and before the authorities could quell the disturbance the windows of Dr. Monro's anatomical establishment were destroyed, while the inmates stood in imminent danger of their lives.

Notwithstanding the extreme views the people of Scotland held against the resurrectionists, as the body-snatchers were named, their horrible trade continued to prosper, and it received many recruits. The surgeons, even, gradually dropped into the business; perhaps not themselves engaging in it personally, but at least sanctioning and approving of it by the purchase of the bodies offered them. But besides these, a class of men became resurrectionists as a matter of trade, and no churchyard in the country was safe from their depredations. The law was comparatively powerless, or took refuge under the pretext of the necessity for subjects being procured, but it took no

steps to produce a remedy. The people, therefore, took matters into their own hands, and were not slow in punishing any one suspected of body-snatching, as the following story from the *Scots' Magazine* for 1742 will show. On the 9th of March of that year the body of a man, Alexander Baxter by name, which had been interred in the West Kirkyard of Edinburgh, was found in a house adjoining the shop of a surgeon named Martin Eccles, in that city. The popular indignation had been raised by the suspicion, amounting almost to certainty, that the churchyards were being desecrated, and it needed very little to cause a tumult. The Portsburgh drum was seized, and beat through the Cowgate. The populace demolished the contents of Eccles' shop, smashed the windows of the houses of other surgeons, and it was with the greatest difficulty that the authorities were able to quell the riot. Eccles and some of his apprentices were brought before the court charged with the offence of being accessory to the lifting of bodies, but the charge was abandoned for want of proof. Later, on the 18th of the same month, the house of a gardener named Peter Richardson, in Inveresk, was burned by the people on the suspicion that he had some hand in pilfering the village churchyard of its dead; and on the 26th, a chairmaster and carrier were banished the city of Edinburgh for being in possession of a street-chair containing a body, and the chair itself was burned by the public executioner under the order of the magistrates. In the July following, under the sentence of the High Court of Justiciary, John Samuel, a gardener in Grange-gateside, was publicly whipped through Edinburgh for having been detected at the Potterrow-port, in the April preceding, selling the corpse of a child which had been buried in Pentland Kirkyard a week before. He was also banished from Scotland for seven years.

In Glasgow, about the same period, a riot of a serious nature occurred. On the 6th of March, 1749, according to the *Newcastle Magazine*, a disturbance arose in the city on a suspicion in the minds of the citizens that the students in the College had been raising bodies from one of the city graveyards. The windows of the University buildings in the High Street were broken, a large number of people sustained severe injury, and

had not the appearance of the military intimidated the mob, the tumult might have assumed much more serious proportions.

But it is curious to notice, in view of the main subject of this work—the history of Burke and Hare—that the crimes of which these men were guilty had a prototype in one committed in Edinburgh between seventy and eighty years before they entered upon their murdering career. In 1752, two women, Helen Torrence and Jean Waldie, were executed for the murder of a boy of eight or nine years of age. They would appear to have been nurses, and they promised to some doctors' apprentices that they would supply them with a subject, proposing to do so by the abstraction of a body from a coffin, when they were sitting at the death-watch, for it was then the custom—and still is, in some parts of the country—never to leave a corpse in a room alone. They were either unsuccessful in accomplishing this, or were anxious speedily to redeem their promise and obtain their reward, for they took even more reprehensible means to obtain a body. They met the boy and his mother in the street, and invited the woman into a neighbouring house to drink with them. She consented, and while she was sipping her liquor one of them went out to look for the boy. He was discovered leaning over a window, and the woman carried him into her own house, where she suffocated him among the bed-clothes. The mother afterwards searched for her son, but could not find him. Meantime, Torrence and Waldie took the corpse to the surgeon's rooms, where they were offered two shillings for it, the one who had carried it receiving sixpence additional. They demurred at the lowness of the price, but the students would only increase it by tenpence, which was given them for a "dram." The facts of the case at length came to light, and the women suffered on the scaffold for their barbarous crime.

## CHAPTER II.

*Tales of the Resurrectionists—The Students at Work.*

WHAT has been related in the preceding chapter are some of the early escapades of the resurrectionists. Throughout the latter part of the eighteenth century, these worthies, to call them by a mild name, were the scourge of Scotland, and notwithstanding the utmost vigilance of the people graves were ransacked of their contents and bodies sold to the doctors. But it was in the first three decades of the present century that the horrible trade was in its most flourishing condition. Many tales of the adventures of resurrectionists are told—some of them serious as the subject warrants, others of them amusing in spite of the subject. In this chapter there has been gathered together a number of anecdotes which will illustrate the part the students themselves took in the movement.

Perhaps the Edinburgh district is richer in the tales of the resurrectionists than any other in Scotland. This was only to be expected, for the reputation of the Edinburgh medical school had gone over the world, bringing to it students from all parts. The desire for fame caused a professional rivalry among the teachers, which was taken up by their respective pupils, who were not slow to vie with each other in carrying to the furthest extent the desire to obtain human bodies for dissection. In this they were assisted by the "professional" body-snatchers, and by the beadles and grave-diggers of the churchyards in the vicinity of Edinburgh. Many excursions of this kind were made. Was a body needed? Then several of them joined together, searched out a large bag for the conveyance of the body, and a spade, and their equipment was complete. They had no fear of the watchers who might be set at the churchyard they intended visiting. They trusted to their mother-wit to carry them through any difficulty. At the very worst they could only drop their spoil, and show a clean pair of heels. But here are some of the tales. It would be useless to make any effort to put them in a chronological order. They are stories that have found their way to the

public through a variety of sources, without dates, but it is sufficient to know that the events occurred during the present century.

A middle-aged man named Henderson, residing in Leven, Fifeshire, died of fever, and was interred in a neighbouring churchyard. Two young men attending the University of Edinburgh heard of the death, and about a week after the funeral they successfully raised the body from what had been fondly supposed by the relatives of the deceased, to be its last resting-place. While the men were carrying it away, one of them was overtaken by sickness, rendering it necessary that they should seek refuge in an inn at the outskirts of the town. Into this place they carried their ghastly burden, carefully put up in a sack. Curiously enough, the public house formerly belonged to the very man whose corpse they had stolen, and it was then being kept by the widow, for the support of herself and her daughter. The visitors were ushered into a room, in which was a closed-in bed, with wooden door, such as may yet be seen in country houses, and the drink they ordered was taken to them there. No sooner were they fairly begun to discuss the liquor, than the town's officers roused the landlady, and asked if some thieves who had broken into a neighbouring house had taken refuge on her premises. The men, for some unexplained reason, had by this time taken the body out of the sack, and when they heard the noise made by the constables they threw it inside the bed, and themselves made a hasty retreat by the window. The officers went in chase, but the resurrectionists were too nimble for them and made good their escape. A search was afterwards made in the room occupied by the men, but only the empty bag was found. The widow, however, after the tumult was over, went to the same room to retire for the night, when to her great horror, she found her dead husband lying in the bed which she herself proposed to enter, clad in the grave-clothes she had made with her own hands.

Another story of a somewhat similar adventure is told of Liston, the eminent surgeon, but at this time a student. He had been informed by a country practitioner in one of the villages on the Firth of Forth of the death of a man by a

disease whose ravages on his frame should afford some important information to searchers after medical truth. Accordingly, Liston, with one of his companions, dressed themselves as sailors, and set out on board a small boat for the village. There they were joined by the doctor's apprentice, who was to act as guide. They quickly lifted the body, and placed it in the sack they had brought with them for that purpose. Liston hoisted the ghastly burden on his shoulder, and carried it some distance in the direction of the shore, where their boat was lying. They considered it inadvisable to return to Edinburgh that night, assuming, probably, that if they managed their prize home in the course of the following day their adventure would be more likely to have a satisfactory termination. Accordingly, they placed the bag and its contents behind a thick hedge, where they proposed it should remain until next morning, when they would convey it to the boat. This done, they proceeded to look after their creature comforts, and made their way to a roadside inn. Here they soon made themselves at home. Sitting cosily by the kitchen fire, they gave an order for a supply of good liquor. Under its warming influence they forgot the shocking work in which they had had so recently been engaged, and they amused themselves by flirting with the servant girl, a pretty country damsel. Shortly after midnight, when the companions were proposing to retire to rest, they were alarmed by a drunken shout from the outside, "Ship, ahoy!" The girl explained that the noise came from her sailor brother, Bill, who, she feared, had been drinking. When the door was opened Bill staggered in under the burden of the sack Liston and his comrades had put behind the hedge, and heaving it on the floor he exclaimed—"There, if it ain't something good, rot them chaps there who stole it." He said he got the "hulk" behind a hedge when he was lying there trying to wear about upon another tack, and remarking, "Let's see what's the cargo," he proceeded to cut the bag open. The sight of the contents made the girl fly from the house screaming, and she was quickly followed by her brother. The two young men, who had witnessed all under the terror of discovery, seeing a way of escape, took a hasty resolution. There was no safety for them if they remained in the inn, and



the turn matters had taken showed them that they must make off as quickly as possible with their booty. Liston again put the dead man on his shoulders and carried him to the boat, leaving the tavern without paying the reckoning. They reached Edinburgh without further adventure, and no doubt they would find some satisfaction in dissecting a subject which was not only interesting in itself but which had also given them so much trouble.

This was not, however, the only exploit of the kind in which Liston was engaged. On another occasion he made an excursion in his boat to Rosyth, near Limekilns, on the Fifeshire shore. The church-yard here, on account of its remoteness from human habitation, and its situation on the side of the Firth, had become a favourite haunt for the resurrectionists. The reason for this expedition was that Liston had seen in a newspaper an account of the drowning and funeral of a sailor belonging to Limekilns. The newspaper also informed its readers, what was the most affecting part of the story, that the young man had been engaged to be married to a girl residing in the district, and that she had become insane through the violence of her grief. This sad calamity had no effect on the young student. He saw in the announcement, melancholy as it was, only the way to obtain a fresh subject, and he took measures to carry the project that had taken possession of his mind into execution. He soon got together a band of kindred spirits, to whom he explained his intentions. The party in the boat arrived at the scene of their intended operations at nightfall, and for a few hours they kept in hiding, until it would be more convenient to begin. As they were about to land they noticed a young woman sitting on a tombstone in the churchyard. Of course they knew nothing of her: but her heart-rending sobs indicated that she was lamenting the death of some loved one whose body had been consigned to its kindred earth. This scene delayed their advance, but it was without effect in turning them from their purpose. At last the woman went away, and the students made towards the place where she had been sitting. They found she had strewn the grave with flowers—"Rosemary, that's for remembrance;

pansies, that's for thoughts." Setting to work they quickly raised the body underneath, and speedily carried it to their boat. The party, one of them wearing in his coat a flower he had picked from the grave, then pushed off; but before they were well away from the scene they again observed the woman running backward and forward in the churchyard with her arms waving, apparently acting under the most intense excitement. Her agonizing cries quickened the use of the oars, and hurriedly they left the heart-rending scene behind them.

Rosyth, it has been said, was a favourite haunt of the resurrectionists, but gradually the people of Limekilns awoke to the knowledge that their Golgotha was being desecrated. A party of students from Edinburgh once made a descent upon the place and narrowly escaped detection. They heard of the burial of a woman who had died in child-bed, and they rowed over the Firth to raise her body. When they got to the grave-yard the weather was wild and stormy; as Burns puts it:—

"The wind blew as 'twad blawn its last;  
The rattling showers rose in the blast. . .  
That night, a child might understand  
The Deil had business on his hand."

After twenty minutes' work the students had "the tall beauty," as they had named her, again above the ground, and carried her to the dyke, upon which they laid her until they had climbed over themselves. No sooner had they done this than the plaintive howl of a dog was heard. This incident introduced something approaching a panic among them, and they sought comfort in the contents of their pocket flasks. But their terror was increased by the appearance of a lighted lantern moving about among the tombs. They made for their boat, taking care, however, to carry the corpse with them. The dead woman's long golden hair had become entangled among the stones, and the rough manner in which they dragged the body away left some of the locks, with a portion of the scalp, on the side of the dyke. They immediately put off, and afterwards saw the lantern stop at the point of the dyke where the body had lain. It was currently reported that the bearer of the

lantern was the woman's husband, and that he recognised the hair entangled on the wall.

The depredators were not, however, always successful in carrying off their spoil. Three students attending the class of Monro, *tertius*, hired a gig, and paid a visit to a churchyard to the south of Edinburgh, somewhere about the vicinity either of Gilmerton or Liberton. When they had arrived at the place on which they intended to operate, two of them climbed the boundary wall, leaving the others in charge of the conveyance. They soon brought to the surface the recently-buried body of a woman, the wife of a well-to-do farmer in the neighbourhood. Unfortunately for themselves, these young men were new to the business, and they had omitted to take with them a very necessary instrument of the resurrectionist—a sack. They saw their mistake when it could not be remedied, and they made up their minds to carry the body in the dead-clothes. One of the students had it hoisted on his back, but as he was going along his grasp upon the shroud began to give way, and the feet of the corpse slipped down until they were touching the ground. As the carrier staggered under his burden, the feet of the dead woman came against the ground every now and then, impeding his progress, and causing such a peculiar movement that the youth thought the woman was leaping behind him. The idea struck him that she was alive, and with an oath he flung the body from him on the road, and made for the gig. His companions, as frightened as himself, rushed after him, and the three worthies drove furiously back to the city. Early next morning the farmer was walking along the Edinburgh road, and came upon a white-robed figure stretched out on the footpath. He found it was the body of his wife, clad in her dead-clothes, with eyes wide open and glazed. His first thought was that she had come back to life, and he tried to restore her, though he knew she had been entombed for three days. The task was futile, and he was only restored to reason by the appearance of the Penicuik carrier, who at once divined the cause of the body being where it was found. The woman was buried privately the next night, and an effort was made to hush up the story.

But while the students of the metropolis were active in the

body-snatching work, those of Glasgow were following hard behind them. About the year 1813, Mr. Granville Sharp Pattison, a clever anatomist belonging to the western city, drew around him a band of students who committed many a depredation in the graveyards in and near Glasgow. They had rooms in College Street, in the vicinity of the old University, and there they conducted in secret the dissection of the bodies they were fortunate enough to get into their possession. They kept up a system of espionage over the doctors in the city, learning all the details of any peculiar cases they might be attending; and in the event of death there was little scruple about raising a body from which they thought they were likely to gain information. When any expedition was on foot, those who had been chosen to take part in it were careful to show themselves during the evening in some of the most frequented taverns, in order to throw off suspicion, and then they set about their unhallowed work. These men, of course, wrought in secret, but the suspicion gradually grew on the community that the graves of their friends were being violated. At last the suspicion deepened into a certainty, greater vigilance was observed by the city watch in the hope of laying hands upon the offenders, and many people took the precaution of erecting elaborate iron cages over the graves to give greater security against their desecration.

However, an event occurred in Glasgow which caused an extraordinary sensation. A vessel arrived at the Broomielaw with a consignment of what was supposed to be cotton or linen rags. The cargo, done up neatly in bags, was addressed to a huckster in Jamaica Street, but he refused to take delivery, as between £50 and £60 were charged for freight. He said no rags could afford such freightage, and he sent the packages, without examination, back to the Broomielaw. There they lay in a shed for some time, until the dreadful stench proceeding from them caused the city officers to open them. To the horror of the searchers, there were found in them the putrid bodies of men, women, and children. The authorities ordered the remains to be buried in Anderston Churchyard, and this was done. The explanation of the matter was, that owing to the scarcity of subjects for

the anatomy classes of Edinburgh and Glasgow, the bodies had been sent from Ireland by some students there; and the price of each corpse varied from ten to twenty guineas each. As ill-luck would have it, the Jamaica Street huckster did not receive the note advising him of the valuable nature of the cargo consigned to him until it was too late, "otherwise," says old Peter Mackenzie, who tells the story, "there can be little doubt he would have paid the freight money demanded, and pocketed a goodly commission for the traffic entrusted to his care!"

Although this discovery still further alarmed the community, and showed fully the dreadful nature of the conspiracy which those connected with the medical faculty seemed to have entered into against the peace of the country, all the efforts of watchers and others were unable to foil the ingenuity of the students and their accomplices. Notwithstanding the use of trap-guns placed in the churchyards, bodies were stolen, and the trade flourished. There is, however, one instance recorded in which a student was killed by stumbling over one of these guns. He and two companions were in search of a body in the Blackfriars Churchyard, Glasgow. When he dropped dead, his fellow-students were horrified, but the fear of discovery forced them to adopt an extraordinary method of taking away the body of their unfortunate friend. They carried it to the outside of the churchyard, and placed it on its feet against the wall; then they each tied a leg to one of theirs, and taking the corpse by the arms, they passed slowly along the street towards their lodgings, shouting and singing as if they were three roysterers returning from a carouse. Once safely home, the dead man was put to bed, and next morning the story was circulated that during the night the poor fellow had committed suicide. The fatal adventure was thus kept quiet, and it was not until many years afterwards that the true version of the night's proceedings was made known.

Two other Glasgow students, having heard of an interesting case at the Mearns, a few miles to the south of the city, determined to obtain possession of the body, in order to find out what it was that had baffled the skill of two such eminent practitioners as Drs. Cleghorn and Balmanno. Knowing

that their expedition might be spoiled by the numerous watchers, they took the most ample precautions against discovery. They purchased a suit of old clothing in the Salt-market, and with it they drove out to the Mearns. The body they desired was easily raised, and was carefully dressed in the suit they had provided. Then they placed it between them in the gig, and returned gaily towards the city. The keeper of the Gorbals toll-bar, through which they had to pass, was a suspicious old man, and they thought they might have some difficulty with him. When they came to the bar they halted promptly, and while one was producing the toll-money the other was attending with the utmost solicitude to what he called his "sick friend," who was, of course, none other than the dead man. The tollman, noticing his efforts, looked at the "sick" friend, and remarked sympathetically, "O! puir auld bodie, he looks unco ill in the face; drive cannily hame, lads, drive cannily." Once over the bridge, the students lost no time in conveying to their den the prize they had so ingeniously secured. This device, it would seem, was practised with success in other places, for it is said that in Dundee two men conveyed a body, dressed in the clothes of the living, arm in arm, along the streets, and afterwards sent it on to its destination, presumably Edinburgh.

---

### CHAPTER III.

#### *Tales of the Resurrectionists—What the Doctors did.*

A RECORD of the share which the doctors themselves took in the resurrectionist work has not been well preserved. Personally they do not seem to have done much, leaving the active operations in the hands of the students and body-snatchers. There was a suspicion, however, that they were not above lending a helping hand in a case of necessity, when they hoped to obtain a special prize. At least they connived at the practice, and undoubtedly benefited by it. It has been

more than hinted, that in many outlying places, far from the University centres, a good deal of business of this kind was done by medical men who had with them apprentices whom they had engaged to teach the art and science of medicine, but who found it impossible to do so unless they had, by some means or other, the requisite anatomical subjects. In these country places the churchyards were watched by the villagers in turn, there being a voluntary assessment on the inhabitants for peats to make the fires by which the guardians of the dead sat and smoked their pipes and sipped their whisky during the long dark nights. In a village in the north of Scotland it is a tradition that a medical man set out with his students one night to lift a body which they considered would be of value to them. The watchers, however, surprised them, and the doctor was mortally wounded by a shot fired by one of the defenders. His companions fled, carrying the injured man with them, and a few days afterwards it was announced that he had died by his own hand.

Others, again, laid the churchyards of Ireland under contribution, as a story related by Leighton amply testifies. A young Irish doctor, known under the name of the "Captain," resided in Surgeon's Square, Edinburgh, and many a barrel containing the bodies of his compatriots arrived by boat at Leith addressed to him, and he disposed of them to his friends. He was in the habit of telling how, when at home, he relieved his want of a "subject" in a rather clever way. He had been attending a young man who ultimately died and was honestly interred. It struck him that the body was precisely what he wanted, and he drove off to the churchyard for it. On the way back he met the lad's mother, who asked him if it were "all right wid the grave ov poor Pat?" The "Captain" assured her it was, and drove her home in his gig, which also contained her son's corpse. "I dhrove," said he, "the good lady home agin without breaking a bone of hir body, and Pat never said a word." Once he addressed the body of a woman, lying on one of the Edinburgh dissecting tables,—“Ah, Misthress O'Neil! did I spare the whisky on you, which you loved so well,—and didn't you lave me a purty little sum to keep the resurrectionists away from you,—and didn't I take care of you

myself? and by J—s you are there, and don't thank me for coming over to see you."

A somewhat amusing conflict took place between the students of Drs. Cullen and Monro for the possession of the body of Sandy M'Nab, a lame street singer, well known in Edinburgh. He died in the Infirmary, and Cullen and several others placed the body in a box, in order to raise it by a rope to their rooms above. Some of the students under Monro, impelled by a similar motive, were searching for the body, and they came upon it in the box. They shifted it to the other side of the yard, intending to lift it over the wall, but they were observed and attacked by their rivals. A great fight followed, until at last the attacking party had to retire, leaving victory—which meant possession of Sandy's body—with the original body-snatchers.

The doings of the students of Glasgow has already been mentioned, and the influence which Dr. Pattison had in making body-lifting popular among them has at least been indicated. Matters in that city were at last brought to a crisis, and the doings of this gentleman and his colleagues came to light. The Ramshorn and Cathedral churchyards were being robbed of their silent inhabitants almost nightly, and the greatest excitement prevailed in consequence throughout the city. Two deaths from what were considered peculiar causes occurred in Glasgow about the beginning of December, 1813. On the afternoon of the 13th of that month both the bodies were interred, one in the Ramshorn and the other in the Cathedral churchyard. The students accordingly made preparations for raising both of them. The expedition to the Cathedral was highly successful, for in addition to the corpse they went specially for, the young anatomists put another in their sacks, and made a safe journey to their rooms. In the Ramshorn yard, however, the work had been gone about rather noisily, and the attention of a policeman stationed in the vicinity having been attracted, he raised the alarm. The students escaped, but they were seen to disappear in the neighbourhood of the College. The search was stopped for the night, but next day the news spread throughout the whole community. Intense alarm prevailed, and the Chief Constable,



James Mitchell, was besieged with inquiries. Many persons visited the graves of their friends to see if all were right. The brother, or some other relative, of the woman—Mrs. M'Alister by name—who had been lifted from the Ramshorn, quickly found that her body had been stolen. No sooner was this discovery made than a large crowd rushed to the College, and gave vent to their feelings by breaking the windows of the house occupied by Dr. James Jeffrey, then professor of anatomy in the University. The police had to be called to suppress the tumult. At last the magistrates, forced to action by the strength of public opinion, issued a search-warrant empowering the officers of the law to enter, by force, if necessary, every suspected place, in order to find the body of Mrs. M'Alister, or of any other person. The officers were accompanied by Mr. James Alexander, surgeon dentist, who had attended the lady to the day of her death, and also by two of her most intimate acquaintances. In the course of their search they visited the rooms of Dr. Pattison, in College Street, where they found the doctor and several of his assistants. They were shown over the apartments with all apparent freedom, but they discovered nothing. They had left the house when Mr. Alexander thought they should have examined a tub, seemingly filled with water, which stood in the middle of the floor of one of the rooms. They returned accordingly, and the water was emptied out. At the bottom of the tub were found a jawbone with several teeth attached, some fingers, and other parts of a human body. The dentist identified the teeth as those he had himself fitted into Mrs. M'Alister's mouth, and one of the relatives picked out a finger which he said was the very finger on which Mrs. M'Alister wore her wedding ring. Pattison and his companions were immediately taken into custody. They were removed to jail amid the execrations of the mob, who were with difficulty restrained from executing summary vengeance upon them. This done, the officers dug up the flooring of the rooms, and underneath they found the remains of several bodies, among them portions of what was believed to be the corpse of Mrs. M'Alister. The parts were carefully sealed up in glass receptacles for preservation as productions against the accused at their trial. On Monday, 6th June, 1814, Dr.

Granville Sharp Pattison, Andrew Russell, his lecturer on surgery, and Messrs. Robert Munro and John M'Lean, students, were arraigned before Lord Justice Boyle, and Lords Hermand, Meadowbank, Gillies, and Pitmilley, in the High Court of Justiciary, Edinburgh, charged under an indictment which set forth, particularly, that the grave of Mrs. M'Alister, in the Ramshorn churchyard, Glasgow, "had been ruthlessly or feloniously violated by the prisoners, and her body taken to their dissecting rooms, where it was found and identified." The prisoners were defended by two eminent men—John Clerk and Henry Cockburn. The evidence of the prosecution was clearly against the accused, but the counsel of the defence brought forward proof which as clearly showed that some mistake had been made with the productions. They proved to the satisfaction of the law, at least, that the body, or portions of the body, produced in court, and which were libelled in the indictment, were not portions of the body of Mrs. M'Alister. This lady had been married and had borne children; the productions were portions of the body of a woman who had never borne children. The result was an acquittal. So strong, however, did public feeling run, that Pattison had to emigrate to America, where he attained to an eminence deserving his abilities.

This put an end for a time to the resurrectionist fever in Glasgow, but it was shrewdly suspected that other cases occurred. They must have been few, for the strictest watch was preserved over the graveyards. There was, however, another case which should be mentioned, and occurring, as it did, at a time when the whole of Scotland was struck with terror at the wholesale pillage of churchyards, and the frequent mysterious disappearances of the living, it caused a terrible sensation in Glasgow. In the month of August, 1828, a poor woman in that city was delivered of a child, and on the same evening, some female neighbours observed, through a hole in the partition wall of the apartment in which she resided, that her medical attendant made a parcel of the newly-born infant, and placed it below his coat. When he left the house, they raised the "hue and cry" after him, calling out, "Stop thief," and telling all they

met that the man had a dead child in his possession. An immense crowd soon gathered, the man was attacked, and the body taken from him; and only the opportune arrival of the police saved him from being torn to pieces by the mob. The officers took him and the body to the station-house, the people hooting and howling around them. An examination of the body of the infant was made by several practitioners in the city, at the instance of the authorities, and they certified that it had been still-born. The explanation was, that the young man was a student finishing his course, and that the mother had agreed with him that if he attended her during her illness, he should have the body of the dead child for the purpose of using it as he thought proper.

The result of this revolting work in the West of Scotland was not altogether evil, for, as was said by Dr. Richard Miller, for forty years lecturer on *Materia Medica* in the University of Glasgow, "these experiments in the Anatomy School of Glasgow, lighted up the torch of science in this quarter of the world, and saved the lives of many invaluable beings."

---

#### CHAPTER IV.

*Tales of the Resurrectionists—The Professional Body-Snatchers—  
A Dundee Resurrectionist Ballad—A Strange Experiment in  
Glasgow.*

THE two preceding chapters have been devoted to stories circulated about doctors and medical students who engaged in resurrectionist exploits, but there are many other tales, quite as interesting, told of a very different class of men. Those who entered into this horrible work for the purpose of carrying out their anatomical investigations, can be excused in part; but the men of whom we now speak entered into it with motives not dictated by, and therefore had not the excuse of, a desire for scientific progress, but rather were founded on mercenary greed. Not a few of them were sextons; many of

them were drawn from the scum of the population, who, rather than earn an honest livelihood, were ready to engage in any desperate enterprise which would give them a large sum of money. The work of these men, if all stories are true, at times touched the feelings of the anatomists themselves. It is stated that a Professor of the University of Glasgow, going into the dissecting room one morning to view a subject which had been laid out, was horrified to find it was the body of his son, who had been recently interred. A somewhat similar tale is recorded of a student at the University of Edinburgh. He saw on the dissecting table what he believed to be the body of his mother. Half distracted he posted home to Dumfries, and, in company with his father, made an investigation of the grave where his mother had been buried. It was then found he had been mistaken, for they found the body lying silently in its last resting-place.

In connection with the Medical School of Edinburgh were several worthies who have been made immortal by the graphic pen of Leighton. Here is how the author of the *Court of Cacus* photographs them:—"There was one called Merrylees, or more often Merry-Andrew, a great favourite with the students. Of gigantic height, he was thin and gaunt, even to ridiculousness, with a long pale face, and the jaws of an ogre. His shabby clothes, no doubt made for some tall person of proportionate girth, hung upon his sharp joints, more as if they had been placed there to dry than to clothe and keep warm." The manners of this man were quite of a piece with his outward appearance. His gait was springy, and his face underwent contortions of the least pleasant kind. The people knew his peculiar ways, and many of them seized every opportunity of tormenting him, generally much to their own intense satisfaction and amusement. Another attendant, and one of Merry-Andrew's colleagues, was a worthy whose proper name was practically unknown, but who went by the *sobriquet* of "Spune." With an exterior suggestive of a broken-down parson, his mental qualities were of the feeblest order, or, being vigorous, they found no fitting expression. The "Spune" always kept his own counsel, performing his duties in such a staid and dignified manner that Leighton feels compelled to

say "that you would have said he bore all the honours of the science to the advancement of which he contributed so much." These two men were slightly touched by scientific aspirations, though it must be admitted that these were not by any means the motives that constrained them to follow their unholy employment. The pecuniary results weighed much more than any scientific considerations with the "Moudewart," properly called Mowatt, who was another of the group. He had been a plasterer, but he found that to pursue his trade he had to work hard for little, and he took to the business of a resurrectionist simply because he could make more money a great deal easier—a course of conduct perhaps legitimate enough in itself, but one which it would be difficult to justify when the nature of the change is taken into account. However, these three men were the great supports of the anatomical investigators in Surgeon's Square, Edinburgh. They were assisted by others of less note, important enough in their own way, but undeserving the same particular notice.

These men are believed to have made a great number of purchases in the lower parts of Edinburgh, for not a few drunken, shiftless creatures were willing to sell the bodies of their deceased relatives for a small sum; often an arrangement had been come to before the final separation of soul and body. Indeed, it is to be feared that this was by no means uncommon in all the centres of population. A grimly amusing story is told by Leighton, illustrative of this, and at the same time of the trickishness and love of mischief supposed to be characteristic of the medical student. This is how he tells it:—"One night a student who saw him [Merrylees] standing at a close-end, and suspected that his friend was watching his prey, whispered in his ear, 'She's dead,' and, aided by the darkness, escaped. In a moment after, 'Merry Andrew' shot down the wynd, and, opening the door, pushed his lugubrious face into a house. 'It's a' owre I hear,' said he, in a loud whisper. 'And when will we come for the body?' 'Whist, ye mongrel,' replied the old harridan, who acted as nurse; 'she's as lively as a cricket.'" The unfortunate invalid was terrified, but was unable to do anything to help herself. Merry Andrew slipped out, and went in search of the student who had played such a

scurvy trick upon him, but was, of course, unsuccessful. To resume Leighton's narrative:—"The old invalid, no doubt hastened by what she had witnessed, died on the following night; and on that, after the night succeeding, when he had reason to expect that she would be conveniently placed in the white fir receptacle that has a shape so peculiarly its own, and not deemed by him so artistic as that of a bag or a box, Merrylees, accompanied by the 'Spune,' entered the dead room with the sackful of bark. To their astonishment, and what Merrylees even called disgusting to an honourable mind, the old wretch had scruples. 'A light has come down upon me frae heaven,' she said, 'an' I canna.' 'Light frae heaven!' said Merrylees indignantly; 'will that shew the doctors how to cut a cancer out o' ye, ye auld fule? But we'll sune put out that light,' he whispered to his companion; 'awa' and bring in a half-mutchkin.' 'Ay,' replied the 'Spune,' as he got hold of a bottle, 'we are only obeying the will o' God. "Man's infirmities shall verily be cured by the light o' his wisdom." I forget the text.' And the 'Spune,' proud of his Biblical learning, went upon his mission. He was back in a few minutes; for where in Scotland is whisky not easily got? Then Merrylees (as he used to tell the story to some of the students, to which we cannot be expected to be strictly true as regards every act or word), filling out a glass, handed it to the wavering witch. 'Tak ye that,' he said, 'and it will drive the deevil out o' ye'; and finding that she easily complied, he filled out another, which went in the same direction with no less relish. 'And noo,' said he, as he saw her scruples melting in the liquid fire, and took out the pound-note, which he held between her face and the candle, 'look through it, ye auld deevil, and ye'll see some o' the real light o' heaven that will mak your cat's een reel.' 'But that's only ane,' said the now wavering merchant, 'and ye ken ye promised three.' 'And here they are,' replied he, as he held before her the money to the amount of which she had only had an experience in her dreams, and which reduced her staggering reason to a vestige. 'Weel,' she at length said, 'ye may tak her.' And all things thus bade fair for the completion of the barter, when the men, and scarcely less the woman, were startled by a knock at the door,

which having been opened, to the dismay of the purchasers there entered a person, dressed in a loose great-coat, with a broad bonnet on his head, and a thick cravat round his throat, so broad as to conceal a part of his face. 'Mrs. Wilson is dead?' said the stranger, as he approached the bed. 'Ay,' replied the woman, from whom even the whisky could not keep off an ague of fear. 'I am her nephew,' continued the stranger, and I am come to pay the last duties of affection to one who was kind to me when I was a boy. Can I see her?' 'Ay,' said the woman; 'she's no screwed down yet.'" "Merry-Andrew" and the "Spune" slipped out of the house, followed by the stranger, who pretended to give them chase. The stranger, it came out afterwards, was a student who thought fit to play a practical joke on the two worthies. The dead woman was decently buried, but the nurse quietly put the three pounds in her pocket.

In the course of some transactions in Blackfriars' Wynd, Merrylees had—so they thought—cheated his two companions to the extent of ten shillings, and this was an offence never to be forgotten or forgiven. A sister of Merrylees, residing in Penicuik, happened to die, and it occurred to his unfeeling heart that he might make a few pounds by raising her body, immediately after the interment. He said nothing, but the "Spune" noticing from his appearance that he had some important project on foot, made inquiries which made him, as he said, "suspect that Merrylees' sister was dead at last." The "Spune" told the "Moudewart" so, and they agreed to lift the body themselves, as by doing this they would not only profit to the extent of several pounds, but would also be revenged upon Merry-Andrew for his unfair behaviour towards them. A donkey and cart were procured, and the two companions set out that night for Penicuik, with all the necessary utensils. Between twelve and one o'clock they were at work in the kirkyard. They had hardly begun when they were alarmed by a noise near at hand, but, after listening a moment, they thought they were mistaken, and resumed. At last they got the body above the ground. Then they heard a shout, and behind a tombstone they saw a white-robed figure with extended arms. They fled in terror, and started for Edinburgh

in all haste. The apparition was none other than Merrylees, who, having met the owner of the donkey and cart, and been told that his two colleagues were away with them to Penicuik, suspected their design, and had thus frustrated it. Remarking that "the 'Spune' is without its porridge this time, and shall not man live on the fruit of the earth," Merrylees shouldered the body of his sister and set out for the city. Before long he came near his foiled enemies, and raising another shout he forced them to leave their cart behind, as they found their legs would carry them faster home than the quadruped they had borrowed. This was the crowning part of Merry-Andrew's expedition, for he put his burden in the cart, and managed at last to convey it to Surgeons' Square.

The professional body-snatchers were, however, sometimes employed by other than doctors—by persons who made use of them for purposes which had not even the excuse of a desire for the advancement of anatomical science. The story is told of two young men from the north, named George Duncan and Henry Ferguson, fellow-lodgers in the Potterow of Edinburgh, who were rivals for the affections of a Miss Wilson, residing in the vicinity of Bruntsfield Links. Ferguson was preferred, and Duncan hated him because of that. At last disease carried the successful suitor away, and his body was interred in Buccleuch burying-ground. Duncan's hatred went even further than death itself, for he employed a well-known snatcher, who rejoiced in the cognomen of "Screw," on account of his cleverness at raising bodies, and they went together to the cemetery for the purpose of conveying the corpse of Ferguson to the rooms occupied by Dr. Monro. When they arrived there they found Miss Wilson beside the grave, overwhelmed with grief at the loss of her lover. At last she went away, and soon the body was within the precincts of the college.

In the Dundee district, also, the resurrectionists were able to do a considerable amount of business. There, as elsewhere, the people in the country parts were in a high state of excitement over the frequent depredations made in their churchyards, and it was shrewdly suspected that this was done for the purpose of supplying the Edinburgh doctors with "subjects." Watches were set, but the superstition of the guardians of the



dead, often aided by the whisky they partook of to keep away the cold and raise their spirits among their "eerie" surroundings, made their vigils too frequently of little avail. The wily resurrectionists were too sharp for them, for it was almost a matter of certainty that the body of any one who died of a peculiar disease would disappear within a few days after it had been consigned to the grave. In the village of Errol, in the Carse of Gowrie, such depredations were not unfrequent. About the time that Burke and Hare were operating with so much effect among the waifs of Edinburgh, an incident of a somewhat amusing kind occurred at this place. The parish churchyard was then without a boundary wall, and as it lay in the middle of the village it was customary for the inhabitants to make a "short cut" across it, when passing from one part of the place to another. On one occasion a village worthy had been attending a convivial gathering, and on his way home, at "the witching time of night," he thought he would take the pathway through the churchyard. As he approached it he saw what appeared to be a black horse feeding in the "isle," a low part of the yard. To his horror some one jumped on the animal's back, and made towards him. He took to his heels, and ran as fast as he could, never stopping until he had gained a safe hiding in a farm on the side of the Tay, at a point about two miles to the south-east of the village. When the story obtained currency, the belief was commonly expressed that the horse belonged to a doctor who was in search of an interesting "subject" that had been recently buried.

The churchyard of Dundee, then popularly known as the "Howff," was laid under heavy contribution to the cause of science, and the most notorious of the local resurrectionists was Geordie Mill, one of the grave-diggers. He was at last caught in his nefarious work, and his memory has been celebrated in a song long popular in the district. This production has now nearly dropped out of memory, but as it is a curious commentary on the transactions of the time, it is worthy of preservation. The following fragments of it are from the notes of Dr. Robert Robertson, Errol, and Mr. James Paterson, Glasgow, two natives of the Carse of Gowrie :—

“ Here goes Geordie Mill, wi’ his round-mou’d spade,  
He’s aye wishing for the mair folk dead,  
For the sake o’ his donal’, and his bit short-bread,  
To carry the spakes in the mornin’.

“ A porter cam’ to Geordie’s door,  
A hairy trunk on his back he bore ;  
And in the trunk there was a line,  
And in the line was sovereigns nine,  
A’ for a fat and sonsie quean,  
Wi’ the coach on Wednesday mornin’.

“ Then east the toun Geordie goes,  
To ca’ on Robbie Begg and Co. ;  
The doctor’s line to Robbie shows,  
Wha wished frae them a double dose,  
Wi’ the coach on Wednesday mornin’.

“ Geordie’s wife says, ‘Sirs, tak’ tent,  
For a warning to me’s been sent,  
That tells me that you will repent  
Your conduct on some mornin’.’

“ Quo’ Robbie, ‘Wife, now hush your fears,  
We ha’e the key, deil ane can steer’s,  
We’ve been weel paid this dozen o’ years,  
Think o’ auchteen pound in a mornin’.’

“ Then they ca’d on Tam and Jock,  
The lads wha used the spade and poke,  
And wi’ Glenlivet their throats did soak,  
To keep them richt in the mornin’.”

The worthies were, according to the ballad, discovered when lifting the second body, and it concludes with the line,—

“ And that was a deil o’ a mornin’.”

It was popularly believed that these men were in the habit of supplying Dr. Knox with bodies taken from the churchyard of Dundee, and there was great indignation against them when the revelations consequent on the apprehension of Burke and Hare were made known.

Before proceeding to deal with the events that led up to the Burke and Hare trial, there is an incident of peculiar interest

which deserves to be recorded, but which cannot be properly put under any of the classes into which we have divided these tales of the resurrectionists. In a sense it does not belong to the resurrectionist movement, but as it relates indirectly to it, it may be given. At the Glasgow Circuit Court in October, 1819, a collier of the name of Matthew Clydesdale was condemned to death for murder, and the judge, in passing sentence, as was the custom, ordered that after the execution the body should be given to Dr. James Jeffrey, the lecturer on anatomy in the university, "to be publicly dissected and anatomised." The execution took place on the 4th of November following, and the body of the murderer was taken to the college dissecting theatre, where a large number of students and many of the general public were gathered to witness an experiment it was proposed to make upon it. The intention was that a newly-invented galvanic battery should be tried with the body, and the greatest interest had accordingly been excited. The corpse of the murderer was placed in a sitting posture in a chair, and the handles of the instrument put into the hands. Hardly had the battery been set working than the auditory observed the chest of the dead man heave, and he rose to his feet. Some of them swooned for fear, others cheered at what was deemed a triumph of science, but the Professor, alarmed at the aspect of affairs, put his lancet in the throat of the murderer, and he dropped back into his seat. For a long time the community discussed the question whether or not the man was really dead when the battery was applied. Most probably he was not, for in these days death on the scaffold was slow—there was no "long drop" to break the spinal cord,—it was simply a case of strangulation.

## CHAPTER V.

*The Early Life of Burke and M'Dougal—Their Meeting with Hare and his Wife—Some Notes Concerning the Latter.*

THUS far we have traced the genesis, and the ultimate development, of the resurrectionist movement, and it will now be necessary to relate with some detail the connection of Burke and Hare and their female associates with the vile traffic, showing how they, by adding to the brutality inherent in it, ultimately encompassed their own ruin, and unconsciously freed medical science from restrictions tending to stifle inquiry and prevent progress. About these people comparatively little is known, and certain it is that had it not been for the timidity of the press of the period there would have been abundance of material more or less reliable. James Maclean, a hawker, belonging to Ireland, who was well acquainted with all the parties, furnished a few particulars concerning them to the publishers of what may be called the official account of the trial, issued in 1829, but what he was able to give was very meagre. Maclean's notes, however, have been supplemented, and, apparently, in some instances corrected, by the subsequent investigations of Alexander Leighton.

The most notorious of these great offenders against the laws of God and man was William Burke. He was the son of Neil Burke, a labourer, and was born in the early part of the year 1792, in the parish of Orrey, about two miles from the town of Strabane, County Tyrone, Ireland. Receiving a fair education, he, though of Catholic parentage, first went as servant to a Presbyterian minister, but becoming tired of that kind of employment, he tried in succession the trades of a baker and a weaver. Maclean, however, makes no mention of these two attempts, and says Burke's "original trade was that of a shoemaker or cobbler." None of these trades suited his taste, and ultimately he enlisted in the Donegal militia in the capacity either of fifer or drummer—probably the former, as he was known in after life as an excellent player on the flute. During

this time he was the personal servant of one of the officers of the regiment; and he married a young woman belonging to Ballina. When the regiment was disbanded he went to live with his wife and family, and he was engaged as the servant of a country gentleman. Here an event occurred which may be regarded as the turning point of what had hitherto been a life of respectability. Burke was anxious to obtain the subtenancy of a piece of ground from his father-in-law, but they quarrelled over the matter. How this dispute came about is unknown, but it was of sufficient severity to cause Burke to leave his wife and family and emigrate to Scotland, and sufficient to prevent him from returning again to his native land. He arrived in this country about the year 1817 or 1818, when the Union Canal, between Edinburgh and the Forth and Clyde Canal, near Camelon, was in the course of construction. Making his way eastwards, Burke obtained employment as a labourer on this important undertaking, and while so engaged he resided in the little hill village of Maddiston, a mile or two above Polmont. It was here that he met Helen Dougal or M'Dougal, the partner of his guilt, and his fellow-prisoner at the great trial. This woman was born in the neighbouring village of Redding. The record of her career up to her meeting with Burke is not altogether good. In early life she made the acquaintance of a sawyer of the name of M'Dougal, to whom she had a child during his wife's life-time. When M'Dougal became a widower the young woman went to live with him, and though they had never gone through a regular marriage ceremony, cohabitation was sufficient to constitute them man and wife, and she bore M'Dougal's name. After a time the couple left Maddiston for Leith, where M'Dougal worked at his trade. Here he was struck down by typhus fever, and his illness terminated in death in Queensferry House. His female companion and her two children returned to her old place of abode, a loose and dissolute woman, even more so than when she went away. At the time of the trial, in 1828, it was reported that she had had two husbands, one of whom was then alive, but that is uncertain. This, however, is an outline of her life up till the advent of Burke in Maddiston, when she was living there with

her two children, a boy and a girl. Burke and she threw in their lot together, and lived as husband and wife. This irregular life came to the knowledge of the priest of the district, who advised Burke to leave M'Dougal and return to his lawful wife and to his family in Ireland ; but he refused to do so, and as a consequence was excommunicated. The early religious training of Burke made him feel uncomfortable under the displeasure of the church, but he would not, nevertheless, carry out the dictates of his priest or of his own conscience. He continued to live with M'Dougal, not a very happy life, certainly, both of them being somewhat given to drink, but they appeared to have taken a liking for each other which kept them together through every difficulty. For some reason or other, probably because employment in the neighbourhood of Maddiston had become scarce, Burke and his companion removed to Edinburgh, and took up their quarters in what was known as "The Beggar's Hotel," in Portsburgh, owned by an Edinburgh worthy of the lower class, Mickey Culzean by name. Here Burke reverted to the trade of shoemaker or cobbler, and whether he was bred to it or not is a small matter, for he seems to have been able to make use of it, when in need, in the way of gaining a livelihood. He was in the habit of buying old boots and shoes, and repairing them ; after which M'Dougal hawked them among the poorer classes in the city, and in this way they were able to make from fifteen to twenty shillings a week.

Burke and M'Dougal, however, were not long resident in the "Beggar's Hotel," when it was burned to the ground, and all their goods were destroyed. Among their possessions so lost were the books belonging to the Burke, and these were—Ambrose's *Looking Unto Jesus*, Boston's *Fourfold State*, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, and Booth's *Reign of Grace*. It has been said that this little library of theological works belonged to Burke, but, it may be suggested, that they were not of the type to be owned by an excommunicated Roman Catholic ; they rather appear, judging from their character, to have belonged to M'Dougal, for they are all of the kind affected in most Scottish homes of the period. It is worth remembering, however, that Burke was a man of a

naturally religious turn of mind, though not bound up in any particular form of faith, and that in all his after actions, brutal and godless though they were, the inward warning voice never left him at peace, except when his senses were steeped in drink.

Culzean, after this disaster, hired new premises in Brown's Close, off the Grassmarket, and Burke and M'Dougal moved there with him. Here religious matters attracted Burke's attention, and for a time his actions to a certain extent were modified by them. He attended services in an adjoining house, and even went the length of an endeavour to reform his landlord, who was an inveterate swearer. This appearance of better things did not, however, continue long, and the old course of life was renewed. It would be difficult to say what would have been the course of Burke's life had M'Dougal and he never met; in all probability it would have been less guilty, and would have had a happier result. Had their paths been separate, they might never have been heard of, and a series of crimes disgraceful to humanity might, possibly, never have been committed. But as it happened, it is to be feared that the influence of the one upon the other was for evil. Maclean described Burke as a peaceable and steady worker when free from liquor; and even when intoxicated he was rather jocose and quizzical, and by no means of a quarrelsome disposition. M'Dougal, on the other hand, was of a dull, morose temper, sober or otherwise. Quarrels between them were of frequent occurrence. One point of dispute between them, and which gave rise to at least one severe disturbance, was Burke's relations with a young woman, a near friend of M'Dougal, who became jealous of her. The three lived in the one room, and one occasion the two women fell out so seriously that they sought to settle their differences by force. The man did not interfere until he saw that the younger woman was being worsted. Then he turned on M'Dougal and beat her most brutally, until, indeed, it was thought she was beyond recovery.

Notwithstanding their apparent incompatibility, the couple kept well together, and when trade in Edinburgh grew dull they removed to Peebles, where Burke wrought on the roads.

By this time his habits had not improved; his whole moral character, never very robust, though not without a susceptibility to religious impressions, was on the decline; and gradually he became the associate of men and women whose experience of wickedness was greater than anything to which he had yet sunk. In the autumn of 1827, Burke and M'Dougal wrought at the harvesting near Penicuik, and returning to Edinburgh, they went to lodge with William and Mrs. Hare, the companions and participators in the crimes that afterwards made them amenable to the laws of the country. Burke met Mrs. Hare, with whom he had previously been acquainted, and over a glass of liquor he mentioned to her that he intended going to the west country to seek for employment. She urged that he and M'Dougal should take up their abode in her house in Tanner's Close, Portsburgh, where he would have every facility for carrying on his trade of a cobbler. To this he consented, and he again set up business in a cellar attached to the house, in which Hare, who was a hawker, kept his donkey. Thus were these two men brought into contact, and from this accidental meeting arose that close and intimate connection which enabled them to originate and carry out their diabolical plans against their fellow-creatures.

This William Hare, whose name afterwards came to be so indissolubly connected with that of Burke, was about the same age, and was also a native of Ireland. Brought up without any education or proper moral training, he rapidly slipped into a vagabondising kind of life. His temper was brutal and ferocious, and when he was in liquor he was perfectly unbearable. Before leaving Ireland he was employed in farm work, but better prospects across the Channel made him come to Scotland, where he became a labourer, like his companion in later life, in the construction of the Union Canal, though there is no evidence that they met each other until the year 1827, in Edinburgh. Hare afterwards worked as a "lumper" with a Mr. Dawson, who had a wharf at Port-Hopetoun, the Edinburgh terminus of the canal. While so engaged he became acquainted with a man of the name of James Log, or Logue, who has been described as a decent, hard-working man. Before this time Log had held a contract on the canal



near Winchburgh, at which his wife, a strong-minded, able-bodied woman, laboured along with the men in her husband's employment, wheeling a barrow as well as the best of them. After this Hare turned a hawker, at first with a horse and cart, but latterly with a hand-barrow. In the interval, Log and his wife, Mary Laird, had opened a lodging-house at the back of the West Port Well, whence they removed to Tanner's Close, and with them Hare, on his change of employment, took up his abode. A quarrel with his landlord, however, made him seek other quarters; but when Log died in 1826, he returned, and, as Maclean puts it, "made advances to the widow," and she consenting, the couple were regularly married. Mrs. Log, or Hare, as she had now become, had had one child to her previous husband. Her character, while before not beyond reproach, had been further blackened by her notorious misconduct with a young lodger in the house. This man left her, and Hare stepped in to fill his shoes. The lodging-house, into possession of which Hare had entered on his marriage with the widow of its previous landlord, contained seven beds; and the earnings from his new property gave him the means of drinking without the necessity of working. He took full advantage of his position, became more and more dissolute, and went about bullying and fighting with all and sundry. His wife was not exempt from his brutality, but then she was as ready for drinking and quarrelling as he was himself. With these people Burke and M'Dougal went to reside, after their return from Penicuik.

Two stories are related by Maclean, who knew all the parties well, which serve to illustrate the characters of Burke and Hare. In the autumn of 1827, Maclean, Hare, Burke, and some others, while on their way from Carnwath, in Lanarkshire, where they had been at the shearing, went for refreshment into a public-house a little to the west of Balerno, a few miles from Edinburgh. The liquor was served, and the party clubbed together to pay the reckoning. The money was placed on the table, and Hare coolly picked it up and put it in his pocket. Burke, knowing the temper of the man, and desiring to avoid a disturbance, paid for the whole of the liquor consumed out of his own pocket. Maclean, however, was more



HELEN M<sup>C</sup>DOUGAL.  
(From a Sketch taken in Court.)

outspoken, and on leaving the house told Hare that it was a *scaly* trick for him to lift the money with the intention of affronting the company. Hare knocked the feet from under Maclean, and kicked him severely on the face with his iron-shod *caulker* boots, laying his upper lip open. Mrs. Hare, again, was equally brutal. Once, when returning from his work at the canal, Hare found his wife very tipsy. He remonstrated with her, and then lay down on his bed. She lifted a bucket of water and emptied the contents over him. A desperate struggle followed, and, Maclean adds:—"As usual with her she had the last word and the last blow."

Before concluding this chapter it may be of interest to give the description of the personal appearance of Burke and his wife, as furnished by the *Caledonian Mercury* of Thursday, the 25th December, 1828. It refers to their appearance at the trial, but it may be taken as generally relating to their looks at the time they entered upon their course of crime:—"The male prisoner [Burke], as his name indicates, is a native of Ireland. He is a man rather below the middle size, and stoutly made, and of a determined, though not peculiarly sinister expression of countenance. The contour of his face, as well as the features, is decidedly Milesian. It is round, with high cheek bones, grey eyes, a good deal sunk in the head, a short snubbish nose, and a round chin, but altogether of a small cast. His hair and whiskers, which are of a light sandy colour, comported well with the make of the head and complexion, which is nearly of the same hue. He was dressed in a shabby blue surtout, buttoned close to the throat, and had, upon the whole, what is called in this country a *wauf* rather than a ferocious appearance, though there is a hardness about the features, mixed with an expression in the grey twinkling eyes, far from inviting. The female prisoner [Helen M'Dougal], is fully of the middle size, but thin and spare made, though evidently of large bone. Her features are long, and the upper half of her face is out of proportion to the lower. She was miserably dressed in a small grey-coloured velvet bonnet, very much the worse of the wear, a printed cotton shawl and cotton gown. She stoops considerably in her gait, and has nothing peculiar in her appearance, except

the ordinary look of extreme poverty and misery common to unfortunate females of the same degraded class.”

---

## CHAPTER VI.

### *Death of Donald the Pensioner—Hare's Debt—Negotiations with the Doctors—A Bargain Struck—Sale of Donald's Body.*

THE beginning of the connection of the persons whose career, up till 1827, we have endeavoured to describe in the preceding chapter, with the resurrectionist movement, may be said to have been to a certain extent accidental.

In Hare's house in Tanner's Close there resided for some time an old pensioner named Donald. About Christmas, 1827, he died, owing his landlord about £4, but as a set off against this his quarter's pension was about due, though, of course, it was more likely this would go to some relative who might be unwilling to pay the debt to Hare. The funeral arrangements were made, and everything was in readiness for consigning the remains of the old veteran to their kindred dust, when it occurred to Hare that by selling the body to the doctors he might be able to save himself from making a bad debt through the inconvenient death of his lodger before the pension was due. Burke, in his confession, stated that Hare made the proposition to him, promising a share of the proceeds. After some hesitation Burke agreed to the scheme; the coffin, which had been "screwed down," was opened, and tanners' barks substituted for the body, which was concealed in the bed. Thereafter the coffin and its contents were carefully buried. In the evening the two men visited Surgeon's Square, Hare remaining near at hand, while Burke went towards the door of Dr. Knox's class-rooms. He was noticed by one of the students; and the following strange conversation, founded on the record of it by Leighton, took place between them:—

“Were you looking for any one?” the student said, as he